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Andrej Nikolaidis – Montenegro

Sin (2006)

The Son

Publishing House **OKF Cetinje, Milorad Popović**
(co-publisher Durieux)

Biography

Andrej Nikolaidis was born in 1974 in Sarajevo, to a mixed Montenegrin-Greek family. Until the age of six, he lived in the city of Ulcinj, where he returned in 1992 after the war in Bosnia erupted. Since 1994, he has written for regional independent and liberal media, as well as for cultural magazines. He is considered by many to be one of the most influential intellectuals of the younger generation in the region, known for his anti-war activism and for his promotion of the rights of minorities.

Nikolaidis also publicly defended the victims of police torture, which resulted in his receiving many threats, including a death threat during a live radio appearance. He has often stated that he considers freedom of speech to be the basis of freedom.

He has worked as a columnist in the weekly magazine *Monitor* and for publications including *Vijesti* (Montenegro), *Dnevnik* (Slovenia), *Slobodna Bosna* (Bosnia-Herzegovina), *E-novine* (Serbia), and *Koha Ditore* (Kosovo). Since 2010, he has been employed as an advisor for culture and free society in the parliament of Montenegro.

Synopsis

The Son follows one night in the life of a hero with no name, a writer whose life is falling apart. That afternoon, his wife left him, while for many years he has been in conflict with his father, who blames him for his mother's death. Incapable of finding inner calm, he leaves into the warm, Mediterranean night, in the city of Ulcinj, itself a multilayered mixture of European dimensions, African influences, and the communist past.

The hero of *The Son* is a man who can't adapt to new times and rules. On his journey into the night, he meets an assortment of characters: a piano student from Vienna who has abandoned his musical career and converted to Islam, a radical Christian preacher and a group of refugees from Kosovo. In the style of Mihail Bulgakov, the characters meet in the old city of Ulcinj, at the Square of the Slaves – a location where the pirates who lived in the city until the 19th century would bring and sell captured slaves, including Miguel de Cervantes, according to legend.

Sin

Andrej Nikolaidis

Bio je prvi sumrak. Sunce je ponovo zalazilo iza Stričevog maslinjaka, kako smo zvali brdo sa desetak korijena masline, koje nam je, tih pedeset hektara makije pune poskoka i divljih svinja, zaklanjalo pogled na more. Otac je tvrdio da je jednom vidio *nešto sa onog svijeta*, tako je rekao, kako slijeće iza tog brda. Nikada ga nisam uspio ubijediti da je to bilo sunce. Iz popodneva u popodne sjedjeli smo na terasi i čekali suton. Šutke smo gledali sunce kako zalazi, kako se gubi iza siluete brda koje oduvijek stoji između mene i svijeta. Kada bi svjetlost zgasnula, utac bi ustao, autoritativno rekao *ne, nipošto, to nije bilo sunce*. Potom bi nestao u kući. Nadalje su samo tonovi Bacha odavali da još uvijek postoji, da kao i svake večeri leži u mraku spavaće sobe, paralisiran depresijom koja ga zlostavlja već dvije decenije.

Te večeri, brdo je gorjelo. Umjesto svježeg vjetra s mora, u lice me je tukla vrelina šume u plamenu. Vatra će ponovo odnijeti sav očev trud, pomislio sam. Poslije svakog požara, policija je obilazila teren i pokušavala pronaći trag koji bi ih doveo do počinioca. Nikada, treba li reći, nisu otkrili ništa. Ni komad stakla, ni šibicu, kamoli tragove piromana. Nikada ni neće otkriti ko nam pali brdo, kad vam kažem, kako bi i mogli otkriti, kada ovaj ogranj dolazi s onoga svijeta, ponavljao je otac.

Kada je brdo prvi put gorjelo, on je to shvatio kao znak od Boga. Čitav život mi je prošao, a da se nisam ni okrenuo na maslinjak koji mi je stric ostavio. Sada više nema maslinjaka. Ima samo moje obaveze prema toj zemlji. Tako je rekao moj otac sklon fatalizmu, kao i svi u ovoj mahnitoj, proklesoj porodici.

Ogradio je čitavo brdo. Probijao se kroz izgorjelu šumu, korak po korak, lomio kamen i u stijenu, kao u srce vampira, zabijao glogove kočeve. Onda je na kočeve kačio bodljikavu žicu koja mu je drala meso na rukama. Mjesecima se kući vraćao crn od glave do pete, kao rudar koji je upravo izašao iz najdubljeg kopa. To i jeste bio: rudar. Ušao je u srce svojih uspomena. Nije on krčio šumu: on je kopao svoju nutrinu, lomio je taj kamen koji ga je gnječio, uklanjao je lavinu koja ga je prekrila i živog sahranila. Mocar i garav se vraćao kući, sve dok jednoga dana nije saopštio da je njegov posao završen. Imanje je bilo ograđeno i očišćeno. Nove suvomeđe podignute, nove masline zasađene. Poveo nas je na terasu, mene i majku, i po ko zna koji put nam pokazao Stričev maslinjak. Rodio sam ga iz plamena, rekao je moj otac.

Kada je brdo izgorjelo po drugi put, opet je postavio ogradu i zasadio masline. Povrh svega, izgradio je i štalu. Onda je iz Austrije doveo koze. U svojoj radišnosti išao je tako daleko da je čak i čuvao koze. Te godine bio je pastir. Preko dana bi sa kozama lutao brdom. Predveče bi ih odveo u štalu, na spavanje. Ispaša je ove godine savršena, govorio je, iz spržene zemlje izlaze mladice, stoga moje koze jedu najbolju hranu. Ograđene su, bezbjedne od šakala, konačno su na suvom. Kao u hotelu s pet zvjezdica, ponavljao je. Majka je držala da zna

korijen očeve posvećenosti kozama. Stric je, tvrdila je da se toga sjeća iz babinih priča, bio grudobolan. Sa grudoboljom je i umro, rekla je majka. Posljednje godine života dugovao je kozama, rekla je. Neka žena iz Šestana donosila mu je mlijeko. Zahvaljujući tom mlijeku živio je i nakon što su ga doktori otpisali. Bio je sam, bez žene i poroda, pričala je majka. Imao je samo babu, ženu pokojnog brata, imao je tvog oca i te koze gore u Šestanima. Kod babe i oca je živio, zahvaljujući kozama je živio, rekla je majka.

Čovjek iz rodne Crmnice odlazi u Ameriku. Napuš ta svoje selo bježeći od gladi, samo da bi stigao u New York, velegrad u kojem će tri naredne godine gladovati. Spava u napuštenim skladištima. Na pijacama krađe povrće, da bi se prehranio. Ponekad ubije psa–lutalicu, i tada Gospodu zahvaljuje na vještini ubijanja koju je stekao loveći ptice na Skadarskom jezeru. Već nakon nedjelju dana znao sam da ću uspjeti, znao sam da ću preživjeti, pričao je kasnije bratovoj ženi i njenom sinu. Usred New Yorka živio sam kao usred gore, govori im. Dječak ga netremice gleda dok govori o psećoj koži od koje je načinio cipele. Nikada taj dječak nije vidio oca, ali ga zamišlja sličnog stricu, s kratkim sijedim brkovima, kako u cipelama koje mirišu na — možda baš pseću — kožu ulazi u njihovu kuhinju, kako grli majku i njega, kako mu, onako kako čine stričevi, u džep tutne nešto novca za slatkiše, kako uveče, *kao stric*, pripovijeda sve one uzbudljive avanture koje je proživio.

Čovjek u Americi stekne imetak, ali umre prepuklog srca. Nikada se nije ženio, zato je nesretan umro, dječak čuje majku kako govori. Sve što sam uradio, sav put koji sam prošao, sve je uzalud jer umirem bez sina, tako je pred smrt rekao tvoj stric, rekla mu je majka, rekao mi je otac. Sve što je imao

ostavio je porodici svoga brata. Da se stric nije vratio duže bi živio, do smrti je tvrdila moja majka, gledao je tvoga oca i patio za svojim nerođenim sinom, imala je običaj da kaže, to ga je na koncu ubilo. Čovjek se čitav život muči da bi umro sam kao pas. Sav imetak ostavi ženi svoga brata. Spasi je od siromaštva u kojem je, nakon muževe smrti, bila osuđena da podiže dijete. Čitavu mladost sam jeo stričev trud, hranio sam se njegovim znojem i mukom, tako je govorio moj otac.

Čovjek se muči i onda umre. Eto čitave priče o svakom od nas, eto potpune biografije čitavog ljudskog roda. Sahranjen je prije pedeset godina. Sve što je od njega ostalo noćas gori.

Sada je sve gotovo, mislio sam dok sam gledao plamen kako se diže u noćno nebo. Šuma je ponovo gorjela, po treći put u deset godina. Vatra će napokon poraziti oca. On više nema snage da imanje ponovo diže iz pepela. Otkako je majka umrla, kroz nametnutu samoću na koju nije bio spreman, ojačala je depresija. Gotovo da je sasvim prestao izlaziti iz kuće. Po čitav dan je samo sjedio u zamračenom salonu. O čemu je razmišljao, pitao sam se i bilo mi je svejedno. Samo sam se nadao da razmišlja, da barem misli uspijevaju da probiju glatke, visoke zidove depresije koja ga je okružila.

Te noći je brdo gorjelo, ali on nije izašao pred kuću, ni da osmotri vatru koja je gutala sav njegov trud. Sa balkona svoje kuće gledao sam terasu njegove, bez nade da će se ukazati, da će kročiti kroz vrata iza kojih je riješio da umre. Njegova žena je umrla, moja je otišla. Dva čovjeka, svaki u svojoj kući, koje čak ni stotinjak metara udaljeni požar nije mogao ujediniti, makar u pogledu na vatru u kojoj nestaje njihovo imanje.

Brdo u plamenu je zvučalo kao pucketanje stare ploče. Kao šum na kaseti. Kao nešto što će ukloniti pritisak na dugme *Dolby*. Plamen se, međutim, nezaustavljivo širio ka podnožju strme padine. Uključio sam lokalni radio. Javljao je da su *prve kuće već evakuisane*. Iza prvih kuća su, naravno, druge kuće. A onda moja. Užasnula me je pomisao da je čitav komšiluk ponovo *udružio rad* i svim snagama pokušava da zaustavi požar. A zapravo smetaju vatrogascima da rade svoj posao. Mogao sam da zamislim kako me ogovaraju. Samo on nije došao, vidio sam ih kako šapuću, pa njihovo gori a njega nema, pa zar mi da gasimo njihovo, pitaju se. I pri tom ignorišu činjenicu da spašavaju svoje kuće, ne moj maslinjak. Da moj maslinjak gase samo zato što se boje da će plamen zahvatiti njihove kuće. *Moj maslinjak*, koji uostalom i nije moj.

Vlada je, javili su na radiju, sve kanadere prodala Hrvatskoj, zato što su procijenili da im nije potrebna flota aviona za gašenje požara. To je bilo na proljeće. Već u prvim danima juna primorje je zapaljeno. I još gori. Lastva iznad Tivta, Budva, Petrovac, Možura, sve do Skadarskog jezera. Sada gori i Ulcinj, plamen se sa Stričevog brda proširio do prvih kuća Limana. Zidine Starog grada su u opasnosti, javio je radio.

Zato što je Vlada prodala avione, požar gase helikopterima. U nečem što liči na vreće vuku vodu koju ispuštaju na vatru. U trenutku kada voda padne po tlu, dim i para zaklone pogled na ljepotu vatre. Sve nestaje u sivilu i narednih minut–dva potrebno je plamenu da ponovo uspostavi vladavinu nad imanjem moga oca.

Ubrzo shvatam da mi je prizor dosadan. Sada su tu već tri helikoptera. Jasno je da će poraziti vatru — još jedan trijumf tehnike. Nema tu više ničeg za mene, ničeg tamo gdje se bore tehnika i priroda. Prosto ne znam što je od to dvoje monstruoznije — priroda ili tehnika kojom je pokušavaju nadvladati. Prije nego se okrenem i vratim u sobu, pogledam očevu kuću. Svjetla su ugašena, ali znam da ne spava.

The Son

Andrej Nikolaidis

Translated from the Montenegrin by Will Firth

The first shades of night were falling. The sun was setting once more behind my great-uncle's olive grove, which is what we called the hill laden with rows of overgrown olive trees. In fact, it was fifty hectares of viper- and boar-infested scrub blocking our view of the sea. My father claimed he had once seen 'something other-worldly' come down to land behind the hill. I never managed to convince him that it was just the sun. Evening after evening, we sat on the terrace waiting for darkness to fall. We watched in silence as the sun slowly disappeared behind the silhouette of the hill, which had always stood between me and the world. When the light was gone, my father would get up, state resolutely, 'No way, that wasn't the sun!' and disappear into the house. From then on, the only sign of his existence would be strains of Bach which escaped from the dark of the bedroom, where he lay paralysed by the depression which had abused him for two decades.

That evening the hill caught on fire. Instead of feeling a breeze from the sea, I was hit in the face by the heat of the burning forest. The fire would erase all my father's labours once more, I thought. After each blaze, the police scoured the terrain searching for evidence which would lead them to the culprit. Needless to say, they never found anything: not a single piece of broken glass or a match, let alone a trace of the firebug. 'They'll never find out who sets fire to our hill, I tell you.

How can they when the fire comes from the other world?’ my father repeated.

When the hill burned the first time, he saw it as a sign of God: ‘My whole life had passed by without me even taking a proper look at the olive grove my uncle left me. Now there’s no olive grove left – just my obligation to the land,’ my father said in the fatalism so typical of this crazy, blighted family.

He built a fence around the entire hill. He worked his way through the charred forest step by step, breaking stones and driving hawthorn-wood stakes into the rock, as if into the heart of a vampire. Then he tied barbed wire to the stakes, which tore into the flesh of his hands. For months he came home black from head to toe like a coal miner who had just come up from the deepest pit. And that’s what he was: a miner. He delved into the heart of his memories. He wasn’t clearing the charcoaled forest but digging at what was inside him, breaking the boulder which oppressed him, shovelling away the scree which had buried him alive. He came home all wet and sooty for months, until one day he announced that his work was done. The property was fenced in and cleared. He had built new dry stone walls and planted olive saplings. He took me and my mother onto the terrace and showed us my great-uncle’s olive grove for the umpteenth time. ‘I’ve resurrected it from the flames,’ my father said.

When the hill burned the second time, he installed a new fence and planted the olive trees again. As if that was not enough work, he also built a barn. Then he brought in goats from Austria. His diligence went so far that he even minded them.

That year he was a goatherd. During the day he would roam over the hill with the goats; in the early evening he would bring them back to the barn for the night. ‘The pasture is excellent this year –,’ he said, ‘fresh growth is coming up from the scorched earth, and so the goats are eating the best food. Now they’re fenced in, safe from the jackals, and have a nice dry place to sleep: like a five-star hotel,’ he was fond of saying.

My mother thought she knew the root of my father’s devotion to the goats. She claimed to remember from my grandmother’s stories that my great-uncle had tuberculosis. ‘He died of it in the end, too, but he owed the last years of his life to the goats,’ my mother said. ‘A goatkeeper came from Šestani and brought him milk. He lived on even after the doctors had written him off, thanks to that milk. He had no wife or children, only your grandmother – the wife of his deceased brother, your father, and those goats up in Šestani. He lived with your grandmother and your father, and the goats helped him survive,’ my mother told me.

Born in the coastal range of Crmnica, my great-uncle had left for America. He fled his impoverished village for New York, only to go hungry in the big city for the next three years. He slept in neglected warehouses and stole vegetables from the markets to feed himself. Occasionally he would kill a stray dog, and then he thanked the Lord for the skills with knife and stick he had learned hunting birds on Lake Skadar. ‘After the first week I knew I’d succeed. I knew I’d survive,’ he later told his brother’s wife and her son. ‘I eked out a lonely living in the middle of New York as if I was up in the wilds of Montenegro,’ he told them. The boy stared, riveted, while he spoke about the dog skin he made shoes from. The boy had never seen his own

father, but he imagined he must have looked like this uncle with the short grizzled moustache who now came into their kitchen in shoes of strong-smelling leather (maybe even dog-leather?), hugged his mother and him, slipped some money for sweets into his pocket like uncles do, and in the evening told them tales of his adventures. What an uncle, what a man!

He made it good in America but died of a broken heart, my grandmother told my father, who later told me: 'He never married and therefore died unhappy. "Everything I've done and all the roads I've travelled have been in vain because I'm dying without a son, "he said before he died.' My mother, while she was alive, maintained he would have lived longer if he'd stayed in America: 'But he came back, saw your father, and fretted for the son he'd never had – that's what killed him in the end.'

He slaved away all his life, only to die in misery. He left all his worldly goods to his sister-in-law. That saved her from the penury she faced after her husband's death and would have had to raise her child in. 'All my young years I ate the fruits of my uncle's labour; I fed on his sweat and suffering,' my father said.

The man from Crmnica laboured, suffered and died. That's the whole story about each and every one of us: the complete biography of the human race. He was buried fifty years ago, and what's left of him is going up in flames tonight.

Now it's all over, I thought as I watched the flames rising into the night sky. The hill was burning for the third time in ten years. The fire would be my father's final defeat. He no longer had the strength to raise the property from the ashes again.

After my mother died, the enforced loneliness he was ill-prepared for exacerbated his depression. He hardly ever left the house any more. He would just sit in the darkened living room all day. *What was he thinking about*, I asked myself, but in fact I didn't care. I just hoped he *was* thinking and that at least his thoughts managed to break through the tall, smooth walls of depression which surrounded him.

That night the hill was on fire, but he didn't go out in front of the house even just to watch the flames which were swallowing up all his labours. From the balcony of my house I watched the terrace of his, without hope that he would appear and maybe even step through the door he had decided to die behind. His wife had died, and mine had left me. Two men, each in his own house, whom not even a fire blazing a hundred metres away could unite, not even just to watch it devour their property.

The burning hill sounded like the crackle of an old record. Or the hiss of a cassette. Something you could get rid of by pressing the Dolby button. But now the flames spread out of control down the slopes of the hill. I turned on the local radio. They reported that the first houses had been evacuated. Behind the first houses, of course, were more houses. And then mine. I was horrified by the thought that the whole neighbourhood had again pooled its efforts and was doing its utmost to stop the fire. And in doing so was obstructing the fire brigade in doing its job. I could just imagine the neighbours gossiping about me. *He's the only one who's not here*, I could hear them whisper to each other. *It's their property that's burning and he's not here. Why do we have to put out their fire?* they asked themselves, ignoring the fact that they were out there protecting their

houses, not my olive grove. They were only fighting the fire in my olive grove because they feared it could encroach on their houses. ‘My olive grove’, which wasn’t mine anyway.

They said on the radio that the government had sold all its Canadair aircraft to Croatia because it had assessed that the country didn’t need a fleet of water bombers. That was in the springtime. The coastal area had been set alight in the first days of June and was still burning – from Lastva above Tivat to Budva, Petrovac, Možura and all the way to Lake Skadar. Now Ulcinj was ablaze too: the flames had spread from my great-uncle’s hill to the first houses in the suburb of Liman. The walls of the Old Town were also at risk, the radio reported.

Since the government had sold the aeroplanes, the fire was being fought with helicopters. They were hauling up water in what looked like sacks and dropping it on the fire. The moment the water fell on the ground, smoke and steam obscured its elemental beauty. Everything vanished in grey, but the flames only needed another minute or two to re-establish their reign over my father’s property.

Soon I found the scene boring. Three helicopters were now in operation and it was plain to see that they would defeat the fire – one more triumph of technology. There was nothing left for me where technology and nature were pitted against each other. I simply don’t know which is more monstrous – nature or the methods people employ in order to dominate it. Before turning and going back into the room, I glanced over to my father’s house. The lights were off, but I knew he wasn’t asleep.



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