

NIKOLA
MALOVIC

SAIL
of HOPE

Translated from Serbian by
Eli Gilic

■ Laguna ■

Original title:
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JEDRO NADE

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Inside cover – Vincenzo Maria Coronelli, Venice, 1685
(courtesy of Museum of the Town Perast)



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*To my brother Boris,
a merchant navy officer*

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Our perspective is in our retrospective.

Milos Milosevic (MCMXX-MMXII),
admiral of the *Boka* Navy,
13-centuries old organization of the Bay mariners.

I



1



The mayor of Perast invited me to visit my ancestral hometown. Her services managed to find me, which wasn't difficult; they consulted Google.

I could have traveled by plane, yet I chose a ship since it's slower. I have been rushing my whole life, and now for the first time, I wanted to buy some time.

Time became a snowball along the side: it was impossible to visit Perast in 0,000,000,000.001 seconds. And I have lived there for years, as a native, with Google. I tracked how many ships came and what was going on, how the man-made island Our Lady of the Rock traditionally enlarges every July the 22nd, and how the Smekja Palace rises from the sea of other palaces, equally high after the most recent earthquake.

"Saint Nicholas" sailed forward, from Bari to Kotor, the capital of Boka. The white bow briefly pierced the blue sea, but the propeller behind the stern sewed it up.

I wanted to be alone. Everything seemed to point toward the theory that sometimes it's good to submit to essential slowness.

If I could only move the manufacture of sailor shirts to Perast.

A difficult decision was unfolding before me, bathed in two blues, making all following choices easy.

The burden of determination was even stranger because I was ceaselessly sailing backward: to the place my baroque ancestors left behind many centuries ago, forever.

And from the stern in the midst of the Eastern Mediterranean, while casting glances at Italy, the country behind the horizon, I decisively knew that my back was entering the waters of the Adriatic, the waves of my own future.

Come é strano!

I was leaving, yet returning...

2



Kotor surprised me.

Such miles of ramparts surrounding the Town and whole mountain above the medieval core couldn't be seen in other posts. History was visibly pulsing from Kotor.

I hired an ancient, wooden rowboat.

It was the end of April and many rowers were already waiting on the Riva. Resting on their oars, they were eating sandwiches with mortadella. The men were picking the fatty bits and throwing them to see who will be faster, the cats or the seagulls. I boarded the rowboat of a blonde rower named Tony. He couldn't be older than twenty. Blue letters on his white shirt said: Tony.

"Fra quanto tempo arriviamo a Perast?"

“If the opposite currents don’t slow us down, we’ll be in Perast in two hours.”

Tony was rowing.

Every now and then, he would glance at the sun and then at me, smile healthily, toothily, completely symmetrical, drag harder then pick a bottle standing behind his heels, take a sip and continue. He transports people honestly, I concluded. Tony never drank water from his one-liter glass bottle before making a stronger move – compensating those few seconds with momentum on the sea surface. Then he would swap the sweaty salt from his body with water down his sweet throat.

While we chatted about his remaining exams on the Maritime Academy, does he consider Perast or Kotor, or perhaps London, Antwerp, Dubai, Singapore or Shanghai as a city for experiencing adventure alone, or with his family – the rower always arranged the mimic details of his superior young character in such a way that no woman in the rowboat could resist him during the journey from Kotor to Perast.

“Only three ports? Let me see. It’s very interesting ... Singapore, Hong Kong and Hamburg are choices for a young man. But for a sailor, hmm, along with his job and family that would be waiting for him there, number 1 is Singapore, a jungle of diversity, number 2 is Sydney, a tame colony, and Shangai is number 3.”

Animals confirmed that the student is striking, that he can compete with the miraculous nature of the bay made of a sea of mountains, perilously looming over the catalogue of coastal baroque stone towns. Seagulls landed on the rowboat and small fish jumped aside from the bow, revealing their presence to him.

I thought that it was a coincidence until Tony, after rowing for an hour and a half, apologized very politely and started splashing his face with sea water.

The sun was scorching everything on land, and a meter below the sea surface. But a bunch of pilchards, bogues and sarda sardas rose to the surface only to, seemingly, look at Tony up close.

Why should I lie, he was beautiful beyond measure.

I couldn't take my eyes off his classic proportions.

Especially from his face, which was losing a fortune every day by adorning the Bay instead of places in this fjord where there are more cameras than insatiable seagulls and tourists, always hungry for entertainment, put together.

“Who do you love, Tony?”

“I have many loves. Perast and Boka Kotorska. I love my sister and grilled seabream...

“And grilled Pandora!”

“Yes, grilled on grapevines' embers. It's a sin to wash your teeth after such a seabream. What about you?”

“I am only beginning to love Boka. I've never set foot in Perast.”

3



The doorman in livery said that podestate Maria Zmajevic wasn't in Smekja Palace, the City Hall, at the moment. She wasn't in her cabinet.

“You will find her in the Town giardino”, he added.

I showed him my invitation, but the doorman waved his hand dismissively. Kind man, he was helpful:

“The podestate sees callers all day. Even when she is in the Town giardino. Therefore, climb the stairs running through the Palace and turn left when you see the sign of jujube.”

“What’s your name?”

“Tonci, sior Smekja.”

“Thank you, sior Tonci.”

I didn’t know what a jujube is, nor how should a *sign of jujube* look like. Giardino is a garden, that much was clear. The mayor is podestate. The Boka dialect is full of words of Venetian origin.

At the top of the curved stone staircase, above the vault through which the fierce sun streamed along with pollen grains and an occasional curious bee, there really was an ancient carving – which an artisan mason made with a mallet and spike – shaped as a stylized plant, perhaps a fruit tree. Behold, it was the plant from my family coat of arms – the Smekja coat of arms! A right hand clasping a jujube branch with three sprigs.

The garden was on a cascade at the same height as the first floor of the depandance of the massive Smokja complex. Pollen from flowering plants painted it yellow, and the fledgling greenery merged with the blue sky.

My ancestors were forced to leave this paradise overlooking the islands.

The tax on *stâr*¹ of cargo per sailboat became bigger than *stâr* of cargo on much faster steamships. Old Perastians, although merchants known for their enterprise, were also fatalists, which is indeed an anachronistic trait. The Dentali,

¹ Old Venetian unit of measurement for goods lost on sea.

Vukasovic, Studen, Smilojevic, Rajkovic, Silop, Cizmaj, Sestokrilovic, Perojevic, Stojacic, Bratic and Miokovic families – all of them persistently refused to give up sailboats and free wind for the sake of significantly higher priced speed.

Besides, steamers didn't provide the art of navigation. Their crews and decks were sooted. That was the opinion of representatives from all *kazadas*, twelve noble fraternities in the town, including the Smekjas from *kazada* Cizmaj, with all their secondary branches. Everything that floated – ebbed.

A wave of history can surprisingly drown gold, and bring flotsam and jetsam to the surface.

Suddenly, my earthy eye wandering over the garden plants full of spring buds found a comparative in the curves of a woman with a dominant attitude. Presumably, Maria Zmajevic.

My pupils narrowed.

In a split second, my eyes touched her there, there, and there – all the parts that sprouted a man's desire for deeper knowledge.

Her face, years of age, whole body, attitude.

The governess of Perast was breathing visibly, her chest rising and falling underneath the canopy of an orange tree in bloom.

In order to introduce myself to the mayor, I had to bend my head and step under the tree crown.

Instantly, the potent smell of orange blossom stroke me.

The beauty of the forty-year-old woman merged with the sea, fruit and honey.

Bees were buzzing around our heads. An immeasurable crowd, on thousands of flowers.

A kilogram of bees per tree.

“Shh .. Say nothing, sior Smekja... Or should I say: dear Nikola. Just breathe...”

She knew who I am.

“You *deboto*² know who I am?”

“I know every inhabitant of Perast. Breathe. Breathe into the last alveolus; remind them what aromatic oxygen looks like. Treat them with iodine. Not like that: Breathe in while looking at the sea. Turn toward the islands, where the crown is thinner! Just like that. The bavizela always blows from the sea.”

“Bavizela?”

“The breeze bavizela. What a nice name for an autochthonous wind, don’t you think?”

I was breathing. While looking at Our Lady of the Rock and St. George.

The orange tang was very strong, an ambrosial *miracul* for the nostrils. As if someone had stirred a spoon of honey into boiling sea water and didn’t add fruit, but perhaps a pinch of crumbled orange leaf straight from the branch.

A glimpse through the blooming branches told me that I’m in the 21st century: a fleet of airplanes was leaving white trails on the blue cloudless sky. I wouldn’t have any knowledge about the planes if they weren’t writing the stripes so intensely.

God, such Zen, or blessing, I thought. With the ruling woman under the natural mist sprinkled by thousands of bee wings.

“What? Are you thinking in these privileged moments, sior Smekja?! You must not think! *Tabula rasa!* Be a *tabula rasa!* Just breathe. Dose it to your liking. Pull the branches toward you and then push them away. Inhale... exhale...

² Word of Venetian origin used in the Bay of Kotor, means: indeed, really, completely.

Choose the branches with more flowers. Just protect your nose from the bees...”

Holy Mother, until that moment, I thought that stories about privileged moments were poetic metaphors.

In Boka, a Japanese would cheat on a cherry with an orange.

I thought that a flower had fallen on my hair; around us, blossoms, petals and pistils were ceaselessly drifting on the bavizela. It certainly could have chosen where to waft from. Kilograms of flowers adorned every bearer plant. Maria Zmajevic picked the decoration from my hair with two fingers, brushing my left ear with her pinky – by accident? – and gazed into my eyes like a woman.

She waited for a moment:

For her glance to retreat when faced with the very male cortex, or for the sling-like shot, from her eyes squinting with power, to deflorate my skull.

Hit, in her pupils, I saw myself nailing Maria Zmajevic.

I paid no heed to her acceptable female audacity.

I don't like older women. Not even a day.

Allora non mi piace.

Perceived as a podestate, though, without sexual implications, Maria Zmajevic asked:

“Did you come to Perast knowing that I am a prostitute?”

I really didn't.

“I really didn't.”

“It is important that you know, dear Nikola. Because of the undertaking before us. But now you must excuse me. The President of the Bay has probably already stepped into my cabinet. I'm preparing myself for him, and with you, I have become breathless beyond measure in this short time.”

Her words puzzled me.

She unsettled my system built on experience with women.

Reason didn't want to accept the words that stole the virginity from the image of the first lady of Perast among equals. Who opened the dams of honesty, permitting us to speak aloud about hidden things from this day on? Did politics overshadow the art of acting, turning politics, as the art of feasibility, into an applied theater disengaged from democracy; or did the local voters start acting, circling who they supposedly wanted instead of who they really want?

I didn't know.

My glance extended to the peninsula – the nearby Vrmac and St. Nicholas a little further ahead.

I looked at the mayor from behind while her white shoes suggestively sauntered over pebbles from Korcula toward the side entrance of the Palace.

With curves sculpted by fish and olive oil, and lungs probably shaped with indulging inhales, the mature woman in a short skirt, perfumed with lushly blooming oranges, dragged a few bees behind her. What kind of assembly between the Bay nature and life, fish and rowers, bees and authority is that?

I shouted after her:

“Vi ringrazio perche mi avete rimosso il fiore dai capelli.”

Maria Zmajevic turned for a moment, making a semi-circle. Enough for her low heels to hiss *shhh* on the crushed stones. She smiled menacingly.

“It wasn't an orange flower, dear Nikola. A dead bee fell on you. If you take a closer look, you'll see that there are more of them in the garden. I want life in this town to persist to the end. Despite the signs of time. That's why I invited you. Do you understand that?”

Not really.

I continued breathing for a while.

Pulling branches toward me and pushing twigs away.
Making a cocktail from different potencies of the same scent.

My nose brushed a busy bee, whose head was plunged under the fat white orange corollas.

I couldn't resist, I had to touch it from behind. From that moment on, I had a new experience: I smelled a flower embracing a bee.

Oh, Perast, Perast!

4



With the mountain behind its back, sparse vineyards and an odd goat on fertile hill cascades, Perast didn't have much of a historical choice.

All its sons, while still at a tender age, were sent to sea: to become *mozzi* – deck boys, then sailors, afterward officers, captains, shipowners, and maecenas simultaneously, but always – warriors. A shipyard exists in Perast since 1336, and seafaring from the time of Pirusts, indigenous people, who ate oysters in caves and sailed along the shore in hollowed pine trunks.

The medieval history of Perast is a history of intolerance towards the nearby, always superior, town of Kotor.

Similar to a swimmer, standing in shallow waters reaching his chin, who wants to lift the clamped fingers of both hands to the surface – Perastians, for as long as they can

remember, considered both nearby islands as an organic part of their coast.

However, the Benedictine Abbey of St. George, with a church and monastery, built in the middle of the 9th century in the time of undivided Christianity – belongs to the Kotorans.

At that time, there was no neighboring island. Only a little rock. A finger jutting out of the water. More precisely, a nail of the little finger.

With the decline of the Benedictine order at the end of the 14th century, Kotoran nobles began choosing abbots among themselves. It was the age of secularization; an abbot-nobleman no longer had to be a monk. The first among the nobles still formally donned the cassock of the ancient order, and the abbots succeeding them – not even that. They had eyes only for big earnings.

From the huge mortmain.

Perastians dutifully guarded the Bay choke point. In Verige Strait, they were death for the pirates.

Instead of rewarding them, only about two thousand residents, Kotorans cut down their vineyards. Only to stop Perastians from thriving.

The oppressed love God but dangerously hate nobility, hoping that it isn't an unforgivable sin.

Lookouts warn them of the first Turkish sails.

Kotorans were sending heralds to the Venetian Doge for years now, hoping to tentatively pull his hems.

They were willing to freely trade freedom for the sake of a protectorate.

Kotor regarded Perast in the same way an ant perceives an aphid as a source of inexhaustible ambrosia. But unlike ants with its antennae, Kotor didn't stimulate Perastians'

backs to entice the future sovereign citizens to remain under the hand that tapped them without any reward.

Brought to the verge of existence, Perastians finally decided to substitute life on the edges of the mountain for life on the sea.

An onlooker would say that they choose wisely. Collectively, they decided to cast off. To replace the short bay stripes with long sea ones.

Fear prevented Kotorans from doing that. Not in a group. Truthfully, they didn't need to.

Well-nourished nobility, merchants and traders ruled inside the town walls. They were caravan owners or partners. Every minute, a hundred to four hundred laden horses were traveling the routes from Kotor, Pec, Prizren, Trepca, Ras, Rudnik and many other towns. They exported dry meat, cheese, salty fish, wax, honey, wood, salt, colors – and imported copper and gold.

Serbia was Eldorado.

Serbia had that renown in the eve of Battle of Kosovo³, while in Kotor artisans that made swords, shields, javelins and armor and other craftsmen were melting between fires, bellows and anvils due to high work demands; and earlier, when Stefan Nemanja⁴ ruled his beloved county seat, from 1185, to the last king from the Nemanjic dynasty⁵, in

³ In the Battle of Kosovo, 1389, between the Serbian and Ottoman army, Serbia lost its independence.

⁴ Stefan Nemanja, founder of Nemanjic dynasty, ruled from 1166 to 1196. Toward the end of his life, he was ordained as monk at Mount Athos, "Holy Mountain". The Serbian Church canonized him as a saint. It is believed that his remains are myrrh-streaming.

⁵ Nemanjic is a Serbian medieval dynasty that ruled for more than two centuries. It produced 11 rulers (of which two emperors). The dynasty survived through maternal line in the Lazarevic dynasty. During the Nemanjic rule, Kotor flourished.

1371. During the golden years, Serbian kings Dragutin⁶ and Milutin⁷ drank wine from preserved vines in Perast; Stefan Decanski⁸ entrusted Fra Vito Kotoranin with the building of monastery Visoki Decani in Kosovo; emperor Dusan⁹ assigned the treasury to Nikola Buca from Boka and Grubo Paskvalic afterwards; emperor Uros¹⁰ also had two protovestiars from the Bay, treasurers Petar Nikolin Buca and Trifun Mihailov Buca. The Nemanjic monarchs weren't bothered by the fact that all of them were Catholics. Why would they?

Upon the death of the last one – emperor Uros, the great empire crumbled.

The wild Balsic¹¹, slight men from the mounts, wanted access to the sea. And they attacked Kotor in their minds. But in spite of them, and in their name, Bosnian King Tvrtko I¹² declared himself the legitimate successor of the Nemanjic dynasty, king of all Bosnian and coastal Serbs in 1377. He assigned Trifun Buca from Kotor for his protovestiar; and Kotorans choose Tvrtko I for their patron.

When he died, the city became autonomous but weak.

An upstanding blade of grass among a sea of reapers.

⁶ Dragutin Nemanjic, King of Serbia 1276 – 1282.

⁷ Milutin Nemanjic, King of Serbia 1282 –1321.

⁸ Stefan Decanski Nemanjić, ruled from 1231 to1331, and made Serbia the most powerful country in the Balkans. The most tragic king from the Nemanjic dynasty. He rebelled against his father Milutin, who allegedly blinded him; his son Dusan the Mighty (Tzar) overthrew him, imprisoned and ordered him to be strangled.

⁹ Tzar Dusan, Nemanjic, was King of Serbia 1331 – 1346, and emperor of the Serbs, Bulgarians and Greeks, 1346 – 1355.

¹⁰ Emperor Uros, the last Nemanjic, 1355 –1371.

¹¹ Balsic - Serbian medieval dynasty that ruled part of today's Montenegro, 1360 – 1421.

¹² Tvrtko I - king of medieval Bosnia, with the title “King of Bosnian and Coastal Serbs”, 1338 – 1391.

Several times it proudly suggested, then asked, and finally implored Venice to immediately! put the flag of Republic of La Serenissima, a winged lion, over the city fort.

And it came to pass.

In 1420.

In that time, almost nothing changed in the town only a two-hour row away. At least not for the better. It was boiling in Perast. Even sizzling in the last few years.

In 1530 the village got a new abbot.

That man, Pompej Paskvali, prevented girls from one mortmain feud to marry young men from other feud-particles. He milked the blended sweat and blood of his spiritual sheep, not caring much about their souls.

Therefore, with a great ruckus, the Perastians decided to stick together, hence burying the serfs in themselves and finally sprouting seafarers.

On May the 3rd 1535, seventy armed men interrupted God's service. They killed the spiritual procurator, abbot Paskvali, on the island altar – and every last one of them, by the decision of Pope Paul III, was excommunicated from the Catholic Church for eleven years.

There is no information how many Perastians donned mourning blacks because they ceased to exist in the Book of Life.

It also stays unknown whether all Perastians felt relieved after the *sticking together* commotion. Still, rebellion earned them a name, perhaps easier for a gram of the soul or proportionally heavier for the load of balls on the auncel.

Famous shipbuilders of foreign sailboats, guardians of the Bay, rejected peasants and never acknowledged winemakers

started casting off to sea. To the sea of Serenissima, the Republic of Venice.

They will prove themselves there.

On the blue longitudes and white latitudes.

On the sea lengths and widths.

5



I checked into the *Kazade* hotel. It is named after the twelve founding families who over time became noble because of maritime warfare credits.

The page, a good-looking student from the Kotor University of Tourism, was putting the contents of my suitcase on hangers in the closet. I watched his ballet with pleasure. He hesitated and seemed troubled with the task of sorting garments that look the same: my many sailor shirts. Then the striped jackets and trousers. Then my beach towels with blue-white stripes. He obligingly retreated after I tipped him.

I had an online conversation with my staff in Bari and pulled some strings. Only when silence surrounded me did I become aware of the sound of waves kissing the rocks on the shore. I didn't live near the sea in Bari. *Non ho vissuto proprio vicino al mare.*

The priest, Don Benjamin, sent me an e-mail. He explained in great detail his intention to place an icon of St. Nicholas, illuminated from all sides, near the Basilica di San Nicola. And it would be a sacred painting, Don Benjamin wrote, compiled of thousands and thousands of

photo-portraits of people baptized by the name – Nikola. He asked for my permission, as he wrote to many people in the last few days; can I send him my portrait-square so he can build it in a mosaic – and the city of Bari can, in the Year of Cultural Heritage, as he said, show a myriad of its baptized faces...

I answered Don Benjamin that it would be a great honor for me if he inserted my photo-square in the large photographic mosaic on the subject of St. Nicholas. That response will please him. I clicked *send* and returned to the land of seamen whose protector is, besides Our Lady of the Rock, St. Nicholas.

I was about a hundred yards from the main square, on the Coast of Captain Marko Martinovic. The *Kazade* hotel was formerly the palace of one of the most respected noble families, family Viskovic, from the Dentali brotherhood. Without their credits, one couldn't imagine the story of Perast from the 15th to the 20th century. The western wall of the room was adorned with a copy of some fresco, and the eastern – with a copy of Frano Viskovic's portrait. Underneath it a plaque said:

Captain Frano Viskovic (Perast, 1836 – Trieste, 1905), the most important figure of Perast in the XIX and XX century; Knight of the Order of Franjo Joseph, Great Officer of the Serbian Takovo Order, Commander of the Pontifical Order of St. Gregory the Great, Commander and Knight of the Order of Prince Danilo, Knight of I class of the Order of the White Falcon – of Saxe–Meiningen, Knight of the Greek Order of the Redeemer, Knight of the Pontifical Order of St. Sylvester, Knight of the Jerusalem Order of Holy Sepulchre, bearer of the Ottoman medal of Medjidie IV grade and

Medal for Merit *Accademie Universale dei Quiriti*, inventor of the storm compass and cyclonograph, author of maritime textbooks, writer, chief inspector of Austrian steamer company Lloyd...

I saluted the maritime merchant, warrior and patron, Captain Frano Viskovic. My presumption that all members of the Viskovic family will be mentioned in the book about the hotel turned to be right. I saw many portraits in the lobby and at the reception. The others must be in their rooms, with descriptions of who they were and how far they chronologically managed to sail: Martin, Nikola, Pavo, Stjepan, Simon, Komlen, Krsto, Martin again, Niko, Vicko, Frano, Simone, Nikola again, Marijan, Andrija, Josip, Anton, Krsto again, Alvize, Hanibal, one more Martin, Vjekoslav, Josip and Krsto again, one more Martin, Rodolfo, and one more Josip – Viskovic.

I saluted the book!

Reflections were dancing on the white walls mimicking the waves playing with multiplied suns.

I thought: how many more surnames, beside Viskovic, are in this town!

Multiplied by the twelve fraternities!

What a piece of global geography! – I thought to myself.

Paradise isn't always a coconut palm tilted over white sand with a coral atoll in the background. A born Mediterranean will praise images with Polynesian palms and atolls, yet the strings in his chest are moved by a panoramic perspective similar to the one from the terrace of Perastian Bujovic's Palace from 1694, when over the hand-carved balustrade and stone lion, he glimpses the largest harmonious palace,

mine – the Smekja Palace, and behind that the slender belfry of St. Nicholas, and behind that the distant blue-grey mountain range of the only fjord in the Mediterranean, and between all that! – fishing boats and churches – reflected on the sea under the canopy of palms and Mediterranean pines.

Boka Kotorska is a paradise. Each and every part of it.

I smoked a reefer of *munk*¹³ on the terrace, found myself in the Jacuzzi, probably thought in color-frames no longer than a few seconds, picked a blue-and-white striped shirt from the hanger, pulled on white linen trousers and leather sandals on my bare feet. It was still daylight. I wanted to go to Perast.

It waited for me too long. My town.

I saw a smiling turtle seller a hundred years younger than the oldest turtle. The little girl was painting the little bow-like horny ornaments on their heads with red nail polish to raise their price.

One young *Eurotestudo hermanni*, no longer than 7 cm, briefly started toward St. Nicholas Square.

There, in the garden of *Verige* tavern, two priests were sitting at the same table. I recognized the Catholic by his collar, and Orthodox by his robe. They were drinking marjoram tea. With lemon slices.

“The Redeemer the Jews are waiting for will come and that is the tragedy.”

“The world is a sinking ship because its very structure is broken. God isn’t asking us to save the world since any attempt would be futile and ridiculous. Hence let’s not save the ship, let’s try to save as many ship wreckers as possible.”

¹³ Google unknown new drug.