

Mirt Komel

The Sontius Notes

Original Title: *Medsočje*

Author: Mirt Komel

Title in Translation: *The Sontius Notes*

Translator (English): Gregor Timothy Čeh

Literary Agent: Katja Urbanija (rights@goga.si)

First Published: 2018

Pages: 350

Layout: Hardcover, 13x20 cm



ABOUT THE BOOK

The Sontius Notes is a detective novel adhering to the classical rules of the genre rather as one who tells the truth through falsehood, basically by breaking them, constantly skipping into the realms of other, related genre, psychological and philosophical fiction as well as coming-of-age stories or Bildungsroman. The reader is presented with the diary notes of the writer Erik Tlomm who finds himself in Sontius, a town set in an unspecified area of the Soča Valley in the northern Slovene Littoral. The local community, with which the protagonist co-exists more or less peacefully, is soon shaken by a terrible murder when the town belle is found stripped naked, tied to the lightning-struck lime tree in the middle of the main square. Due to the unusual nature of the case a female special detective Dante D is called in. Erik Tlomm enters into a Holmes-Watson relationship with her in order to expose the murderer hiding somewhere in town.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Mirt Komel (1980) is a writer and philosopher, currently working as a lecturer at the Faculty of Social Sciences at the University of Ljubljana. He was awarded a PhD in Philosophy from the University of Ljubljana, having written his dissertation on *The Philosophical Aspects of the Relationship between Discourse and Violence*. He has published numerous scientific texts in political theory, social anthropology, and theoretical psychoanalysis in international and Slovene academic journals, as well as several scientific monographs. Among them is the monograph *An Attempt of a Touch*, which is closely linked to his novel *The Pianist's Touch*. He is one of the co-founders and active members of the international Hegelian association *Aufhebung*. His literary works range from plays, dramatic poems and novels, to travelogues.

An excerpt from the novel

translated from the Slovene by Gregor Timothy Čeh

The Diary

21 August

My name is Erik Tlomm and this is my diary. It was my psychiatrist who suggested I write a diary, apparently to help my treatment. But who am I actually writing to? Him? My wife Lina? Clearly I won't show her my writings. He responded to my expressed doubts by saying, "Write to yourself." So I have bought this leather notebook and find myself here at the writing desk with the purpose of writing a diary. I cannot get rid of the strange feeling that I am writing for someone else – but who?

22 August

Let me explain my first entry.

(Notes in the margin. Who to? Me? Him? You?)

I had a nervous breakdown, the consequences of which were so bad that not even alcohol, my double-edged friend of too many evenings and nights, was able to alleviate them.

On my wife's initiative (and against my will) I landed at the psychiatrist who, lacking faith in his own discipline, first prescribed me some drugs, the names of which I cannot repeat without looking at the actual packet (all I know is that they all had chemical and slightly comical endings, *-zapine*, *-zaine*, *-zac*, *-zepam*, *-zolan*, and various prosaic names as prefixes). Just the thought of having to take medication disgusted me so much that I instead preferred to entrust the curious doctor with a few details of my personal life, managing in this way to win his favour – without at the same time telling him too much about myself.

In all his learnedness, the good doctor soon realised that there was nothing seriously wrong with me and prescribed me some simple leave – "a retreat from the city, away from people, as close as possible to nature" – and almost by chance I thought of the Soča Valley – what better than a place by the river with barely a few thousand inhabitants?

The psychiatrist agreed and before my departure squeezed into my hand the visiting card of his colleague who runs a psychiatric clinic close to the town where I chose to spend my short retreat.

As far as the question goes, I am not quite sure it is even the right one – but the answer was there all along: *Sontius*.

23 August

I had my nervous breakdown at work – though not because of my job. Far from it. How could I even consider anything of the sort – let alone write down or utter such a thought!

They used to say, 'Work is power, work is honour,' 'He who does not work, neither shall he eat,' 'Work sets you free.' Without considering their origin, slogans like this were promoted by our old Party bigwigs, though there was no one walking around barefoot at the time. Neither did anyone then take the hard hand of the Party in leather boots as seriously as people now take the supposed free market. I think that all those slogans about hard work have only been taken literally now when we have turned from socialists to capitalists and are stepping along the same old muddy tracks in brand new cotton socks. In truth though, it is much worse; at the time you could at least blame everything on the system, nowadays people are responsible for their own failures. Burnt out, I experienced this first-hand.

It is actually true that work does have power over me, but as far as honour goes – despite stretching and pursuing the mind and body to the very extremes of what is human – not even a sign of it. Yes, I do admit that, unlike most people in similar situations who burn out simply because they are being pushed to exhaustion by their employers trying to increase productivity in a greedy desire to increase profits, I got myself into this state. Quite admirable, is it not? I demand a medal for special achievements in the work market, awarded by one of those optimistic societies preoccupied with normalising today's paranormalities by conferring prizes with cute names (clever beaver, busy bee, gazelle, diligent ant – it's like reading fables about hard-working animals!).

In Nova Gorica I make a living as a part-time journalist for the *Littoral Gazette*. Just as I was not actually born in Gorica but nearby Šempeter, I don't consider journalism to be my actual profession, but close enough to what I see as my true calling, namely being a writer. My breakdown came as I was writing my first novel, which happened to coincide with a lot of work at the newspaper. I thus wandered around during the day, interviewing people, transcribing recordings from the voice recorder, writing articles about this, that and the other, and devoted my evenings and nights, with copious amounts of coffee, cigarettes and ash, to writing.

I kept up such a pace for a few months, then I was cut down by the unrelenting scythe of exaggeration. I was unable to finish the novel – well, not even to properly begin it! – so I brought the unfinished manuscript with me. It is now patiently waiting for me – as I am waiting for it.

(Note in the margin. Ought I not instead of this diary to be writing the novel itself?)

[...]

The Split Lime Tree

5 October

Today there is no way I can leave the house, not even to go out onto the balcony.

I feel sleepy, as if I haven't slept for a hundred years, and if I could, I would sleep for a thousand and more.

Black clouds diffuse like ink across the dense hillside; mists, their younger cousins, gather above the emerald river, the wind combs through the treetops, causing them to sway unnaturally, first in one direction, then the other.

There is something eerie in the electrified atmosphere, filled with a thundering storm, promising lightning and tears from afar.

I am crying, even though I do not know why.

6 October (midday)

My hands shake and the pen scrawls across the paper in a crazy dance, drawing lines the meaning of which I am not yet entirely aware.

I did go out of the house this morning, despite the slight drizzle – a misty echo of the thunderstorm that raged all night as if the world was about to end. The last drops of the now depleted rain fell just as I stepped along the street in my black jacket and the hood of a thin red sweatshirt pulled over my head. Surrounded by mist and the drumming sound of the swollen river, I crossed the iron bridge and noticed that the tree in the middle of the town square had split in two.

Apparently during last night's downpour, Zeus, brother of the god reigning on top of the town fountain in the square, instead of his usual target, the rusty cross on the church spire, had targeted the unsuspecting lime tree, sending a bolt of lightning to spite national emotions¹. Out of sheer curiosity, still unaware of the actual target of this divine violence, I increased my pace and stepped closer, joining the few locals who had gathered there, open-mouthed, to take a closer look at this strange wonder in this place full of oddities of nature.

As I walked round the tree I was faced with a scene that made the blood in my veins freeze. Above it the skies opened momentarily, sending a bright shaft of sunlight to illuminate the spot and briefly transfix all that was happening around it: a girl – naked, dirty, soaking wet, motionless – placed into the emptiness of the gaping tree, her hands spread out onto two of its branches as if she were Jesus on the Cross or a naked Andromeda in invisible chains.

A crowd of locals soon gathered around the lightning-struck lime tree that the town police had already sealed off with yellow warning tape. Despite the early hour, news spread swiftly and people were astonished by this terrible atrocity. Mostly they were all silent, as if already attending a funeral, all that was quietly uttered was the name that identified the naked victim, strands of wet hair covering her face. "Magdalena!" – "Oh, it's Magda!" – "Her? – No!" – "My Magda... No!"

The silence enveloped in misty air, filled only by fragmented whispers attesting to her name, was interrupted by the arrival of the Mayor and his wife. The mother's crying drowned out not only the muffled reverberations of thunder in the distance but was louder even than the ringing church bells. The

¹ In Slovenia the lime tree is a national symbol. Historically, a lime tree at the centre of villages would be a focus for the community, a meeting point. In the late 1980s, the leaf of the lime tree became an emblem of Slovene national aspirations and has remained an important symbol ever since.

Mayor, unshaven with dark circles under his eyes, stood stoically motionless, providing strong support for his wife who was becoming weaker by the minute. Only with difficulty did relatives and friends approach the unfortunate mother and father as they moved with heavy steps towards what looked like a sacrificial altar. Bible in hand, the compassionate chaplain who was the one who had found Magdalena in the early hours when he went to unlock the church for morning Mass, quietly whispered words of consolation to them. All in vain; their world had just collapsed into dust, charred just like the trunk of the old lime tree, violently struck by lightning, and for a moment it seemed this was the case not just for them but for the entire community of Sontius.

At some point investigators from the crime section of the police directorate from Nova Gorica appeared, as the case exceeded the scope of the local police authority. The town of Sontius has never before had to deal with a murder, let alone such a violent crime that displayed the grizzly consequences of its act for all to see. But even the regional police department soon realised that what was needed here was some scientific help, so they contacted the National Forensic Laboratory. The specialists arrived even before the clock struck midday, combing through the scene with instruments that baffled us, ordinary citizens. The local Sontian police were given the simpler task of securing the site of the crime and telling people to go back home. Apparently this was not that easy, as onlookers persisted for a long time, be it out of curiosity or emotion, almost as if nobody could believe their own eyes.

Eventually the mix of horror, outrage and fear dwindled and people began leaving the scene. Those of us who remained until the last saw how the square emptied totally only after the body of the young Magdalena, far too young for death, was laid on a stretcher and the black bag she was placed in was zipped up. She was carried quickly away, as if she was garbage that needed to be taken out of the place, the region, the state, the continent and the world as soon as possible, before it might mar our society's wonderful self-image where there is no place for something as terrible as murder.

If I had had any strength left in me, I would have screamed at that moment – instead I was just helplessly silent.

6 October (afternoon)

Just as I finished my previous entry and thought about returning to the square to check whether all this had actually happened or whether I had just dreamt it, my landline on the side cupboard by the front door rang.

Vasilija Mahnič, my editor at the *Littoral Gazette*, had found out about the body on the lime tree in the main square and in the millisecond her calculating mind needed to bypass the centre in the brain responsible for compassion, she decided to call me. (How did she find out so quickly anyway? Someone must have called her. Not me. I sometimes wonder why we have newspapers at all when it seems everyone knows everything, occasionally even before it happens.)

Playing dumb, I tried to explain that I was just about to phone her, but she wasn't having any of it and with a mix of diplomacy and blackmail talked me into writing an article, "I know that you're

on leave for health reasons, but as you happen to be in Sontius where it's all happening – can you not give me a report on the murdered girl? At least write me the first article so we can go into print tonight! Afterwards I'll find someone else to cover the case. Come on, You'll get a good fee!"

What should I do? The gruesome image of the split tree and the girl spread across it keeps coming back to me. Journalistic ravens disgust me; newspapers do not care about Magdalena, all they are interested in is circulation. But they will all report on this anyway and, after all, it is right that people know what kind of atrocity was committed here in Sontius.

Newspaper article

Gruesome Murder in Sontius

[image: the split lime tree]

Sontius. In the night between the fifth and sixth of October, a murder happened in the otherwise peaceful town of Sontius in the Soča Valley. The victim, Magdalena Možina (17), daughter of the Mayor of Sontius, was discovered by the chaplain in the early hours of the morning on his way to unlock the church of Saint Nicholas once the heavy thunderstorm that had been raging all night had abated. The crime deeply shocked the local community and soon after its discovery people gathered on Liberation Square, where the naked victim was found tied to a lime tree that had been destroyed by lightning. Local police immediately secured the crime scene and with the help of investigators from Nova Gorica and forensic experts from Ljubljana, collected any evidence that might lead them to the perpetrator. As the murderer has yet to be identified, the Police have so far not issued any statements of the details and appeal to anyone who might have any information that could be useful to the investigation to come forward and immediately call either the phone number of the police station in Sontius (05/334-77-09), the anonymous crime reporting line (080-12-00), the emergency number (113) or send an email to the local police station (ps.sontius.pdng@police.si).

E. T.

6 October (evening)

This will sound terrible, but I think that, at last, something inside me has moved. I do not know what, but I think I will start writing my novel again tonight.

On the writing desk is a typewriter, which I have so far used only for typing up notes from my diary and for writing the newspaper article that I have already despatched by courier. Despite all the typing up, I still have a drawer-full of virgin blank pages, albeit yellowing slightly with age, waiting for

me, only for me, to write on them. Enough of this diary, enough newspaper articles – now it's time for more serious stuff, now it's time for real writing!

I can hear it, calling me; see it being written even before my fingers start the task; I can sense that I am onto something wonderful.

[...]

Dante D., Detective

7 October (midday)

Fate knocked on my door first thing in the morning today. It did not even knock and enter as loudly and stormily as one would expect at its mention, accompanied by a draught, that faithful dweller of my Sontian residence – instead it slipped in tactfully and discreetly, befitting its character.

Her long dark red, almost black hair fell across one side of a beige raincoat that unobtrusively blended in with her snow-white blouse, her tight black leather trousers coalescing into one with the matching boots she walked into my life with. She introduced herself and showed me her National Investigation Bureau ID with her photo, an unusual surname, just the initial of her name and her title, without anything else: Dante D., detective.

“Dante? An unusual surname. As far as I know it's the first name of the famous Florentine poet Alighieri – I don't suppose you could be cross-related, name to surname?” I tried to make a joke but when she did not respond I also nonchalantly continued, “And D is your initial standing for Dana? Diana? Danaë?”

“You can call me D, that will do.”

“D? As you might say in D major?”

“Yes, something like that.”

“D, glad to meet you – I'm E.”

Upon my invitation D entered my abode but refused the offer of some homemade brandy. “I don't drink.” – “On duty?” – “At all.” I lit a cigarette and offered her one – “I don't smoke.” – “At all?” – “That's right.” – “Coffee?” – “Tea.” – “I don't have tea.” – “No worries.” I think we will get along well excellently.

“You have the stove burning this early on in autumn?” she said out of the blue. – “I lit it yesterday for the first time to get rid of the damp after the rain we've been having,” I calmly explained and sat on the chair I had turned away from the writing desk by the window to face her, so I could watch how she slowly walked round the room. She looked at everything thoroughly as if she was already conducting an investigation, from the typewriter to the old gramophone and the bookcase, including all the tacky porcelain on the shelves and the pictures of idyllic nature scenes on the wall. She eventually sat down and spoke to me from the sofa on the opposite side of the coffee table where I had all kinds of

things scattered, cigarettes, newspapers, keys and other odd bits and bobs, “Look. I’ve been sent here from the National Investigation Bureau to investigate the murder of Magdalena Možina. The case is – how can I put it? – unusual. In such cases that exceed the authority and especially the scope of police criminal investigation, they call our department. If things are really complicated, they call me.”

Until this point in her talk, which was like some web presentation of her job, she had been comfortably sitting back in the sofa, arms crossed, stern-faced and with a resolute voice. Now she confidentially leaned forward with her elbows on her knees, relaxed her gaze and spoke in a much softer tone, “In cases where the crime happens in smaller communities, I try – beyond conventional procedures, I should stress – to find a local informant. Locals normally don’t trust outside authority. Not even the local police. Especially if, as in this case, the perpetrator is a member of the community. They want to solve everything the way they are used to solving things, without outside help. Local pride, you see.”

She stopped for a moment to catch her breath but before I managed to think over what she had just said, she continued, “Basically, in cases like this I need an insider, a local, someone from the town, a member of the local clan. Here I found something even better: you. You’re not from here but have been here for long enough to know the people, and, what’s even more important for my investigation, the situation around here. You see, Erik Tlomm, I know all about you but nothing about Sontius.”

At this point I finally managed to interrupt her, “Hang on, hang on. You know all about me? And anyway, how do you know that the murderer is a local?”

A faint smile appeared on her lips, barely discernible, and, despite the impenetrable mimic of her face, it betrayed a special delight in explaining, “Very simple, the only road leading into town is the bypass that splits off the main road up the valley and then joins it again after a long turn across the bridge. On the day of the murder the road was closed at both ends; it was flooded at one end and a fallen tree blocked it at the other. The storm literally cut off the place from the rest of the world until the morning when the body was discovered. We have verified the statements of witnesses as well as the camera at the petrol station; there were no cars coming or going, no new faces on the day of the murder. We would also be justified in even concluding that the actual place where the crime happened, which we have yet to identify, is not very far from the square. It seems highly unlikely that the murderer would risk a long trip with a burdensome load such as a body. We can temporarily conclude our reconstruction by saying that the perpetrator must have murdered Magdalena Možina, then, for reasons that still escape me, found himself in the main square, and saw a good opportunity in the scorched tree.”

A good opportunity? What exactly for? I silently stared at her, turning my wedding ring on my finger as I often did when I was thinking over something serious over. And she had concluded all this before even visiting the scene of the crime? Unbelievable! It took me a while to collect my thoughts and ask, “What if the murderer has left in the meantime?” She once again served me an astonishingly convincing answer, “We can only hope that they are not so stupid. Everyone here knows everyone and

if someone were to suddenly go missing, the perpetrator would instantly give themselves away. But our person here is not stupid. That much is clear.”

If you think it all over logically, the way D has just explained things, then everything seems clear and comprehensible. If however, like me, you are haunted by a mix of anger and fear, you cannot really think anything over at all. Thinking things over involves firstly and foremostly disregarding all emotions – that is something I, at least for now, am incapable of, especially not as we are here not simply dealing with ‘a victim’ or ‘a murdered girl,’ as my interlocutor indifferently called her. The murdered person was not just any nameless unfortunate, the murdered person was my Magda!

“I need your help in understanding the wider picture,” she spoke again, interrupting the silence that had filled the room, but this time with a slightly less thoughtfully controlled and calm tone, “Mr Tlomm, will you help me catch the murderer?” I agreed to it (how could I not have?), “Of course, Dante, I can be your Virgil to guide you through this Sontian *Paradiso* that has now turned into an *Inferno*.”

She stood up from the sofa in all her elegance, embarrassing me because she had to remove a piece of dirt from her trousers (OK, OK, I admit, ever since I first moved in when I did a general clean of the house, I have not mustered enough will or strength to touch a brush or broom). She noticed my unease but responded like a true lady who, despite noticing such things, never thinks they are worth addressing (only petty people like to stick their noses into trivialities and use a big broom on a speck of dirt, wanting to sweep aside matters greater than themselves).

Before parting we agreed to regularly exchange information; I would help her with her investigative work, she would help me with my journalism. In order not to disrupt the course of the investigation I had to agree to her not telling me everything and also had to promise that I would not publish anything without her prior approval; at the same time she added that I might occasionally have to write an untruth or two, if such disinformation might help catch the murderer (I sincerely hope that something like this will not be necessary as it breaches the journalistic code of ethics, which I, despite all we know about manipulation of mass media, do still respect).

Already at the door, she asked me how things were between me and my wife, whether we were better and so on, even the colour of her hair – “Black. But what does this have to do with anything and how do you know we were having problems?” – “Simple; you recently moved here to Sontius, you have not separated and you’re working on returning. You still wear your wedding ring, which you keep restlessly turning on your finger, indicating a certain concern or at least focus on your wife.”

“What about the hair?” I asked with astonishment.

“That? Oh, nothing, just my curiosity.”

She bid me farewell, leaving me alone with my thoughts focused on what had become the three most important females in my life, my wife Lina, the murdered Magdalena and now detective D Dante.