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Note On The Author

Translated from Croatian by Miljenko Kovačiček

Although I have had my hair cut short for more than ten years, in those thirty minutes of sleep I had long hair again. In my dream I read Peter's first, maybe still only novel, the one that is also now to be found in my bag, put away next to my hotel bed.

The story of unhappy love of a classic writer and a young proof-reader was being borrowed from libraries long after it was published in May of sixty-five. Most female readers identified with the twenty-three-year-old provincial girl who was brave enough to write a letter to her admired writer and point to the spelling mistakes in his last novel, copying all the mistakes and suggesting corrections for the future editions. The male part of the reading audience of Peter's novel entitled "Note On the Author" comforted themselves by the fact that great people, like his main character, an esteemed author who was not without prizes or photographs in the newspapers, are also weak human beings, unprepared for major life decisions, just like themselves. Because, to get out of a marriage in which the moments together are filled with retelling the weather report and to admit the existence of another woman, one who does not recognize a bad weather forecast at all, for most of them also meant the publication of their own photograph, the one they had distributed to the members of their narrower and broader family, to their friends and neighbours, even to society as a whole. The minority remained those readers who wanted to be in the place of the writer's wife, always ready to speak out the prepared anthem to her husband's loyalty to selected audiences and to have a casual ironic smile at the proof reader's interventions in his new novel, which she had noticed by only superficially leafing through the book. Nevertheless, having returned the read novel, they left the libraries convinced that their former conviction was shaky that there are more beautiful and uglier, cleverer and stupider and richer and poorer women, and that they belonged to the first one of each pair. Expert reviewers, whose articles cut out of the newspapers I used to read at Petar's mother's place after they came in his letters with an accompanying note, were mostly interested in the unusual end of the novel. The narrator leaves the storyline unfinished because he simply fails to find a sufficiently good and strong sentence to end it with. And to his reader, who he starts to address directly only then, he brings out the reasons supported by various justifications, for which he cannot decide on any of the five sentences he had thought of.

He leaves to the reader of the *Note on the Author* to deal with each of them, to choose one of them for the end and, if they want to indulge in that, to think which of them would, if the author had been able

to take responsibility for his characters, have been his choice.

At the presentation of the book prepared for Petar at his former high school, I was reading some extracts from a copy, on the third page of which there was a dedication "To my neighbor, forever, Petar". Although I only enrolled in the second class of the same school that autumn, with the agreement of the literature teacher, I selected the fragments that would best represent the novel myself. Female and male teachers, wearing their best costumes and suits, the sort they used to wear at school leaving dinners as class masters and mistresses of the class which was celebrating, congested in the first line of the library, were radiating with pleasure because of a student who, according to the welcome address by a presenter from the local radio, Petar's "generation mate", made them all proud and proved the quality of the school's teaching staff over many years. And my own face, if anybody knew how to watch it, witnessed the faith that the author was describing a girl who in the epilogue manages to recognize the best sentence among the five proposed endings, thinking of me.

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And so, while I was reading the novel in my dream last night, asking myself even then why I was doing so if I knew in advance every next, regularly well-set comma, somebody knocked at the door. I opened it in discomfort. In front of me, Petar and His One were standing. As soon as they entered the hall, having pushed me away at the entrance, he grabbed me by the hair, and she, with her mother's scissors for roses that she had been hiding behind her back by then, set off towards my head. Then, behind her, although I don't know how she entered, a big black-haired woman appeared, very similar to their maid of honour, to whom Petar once introduced me in his office. The fat one issued a nearly military command: "Cut!" I started to cry, to struggle and beg Petar to help me. The last thing I remember was the picture of Petar letting my hair out of his hand, going out and slamming the door. That sound coincided with the slam of the balcony door of room one hundred and nine.

Interesting enough, I dreamed it in all these years only one more time. And last night it appeared in my dream, which started well for me, now that I think about it, while the light in the hall was burning and a woman in the bed next to mine slept again guarding her dream with her hand laid over her eyes, in the peace of my rented flat. So many years did I suffer the hours of the day helping myself up with the thought that night would reward me with a dream in which I would feel Petar's body. Before I heard the knock at the door in my dream and after that got up and saw the two of them already standing at the doorstep, ready to run into the hall, I was reading, half-lying on the sofa. I jammed my feet against the middle part of the bookshelf that was, along its entire length, filled with the titles Petar had given to

me.

The owner of the one and a half † room flat, only five tram stops away from the place of Petar's permanent residence, was the son of the boss of his accounting office, Mrs. Miler. In December of sixty-eight, two months after I arrived in Zagreb to study, he emigrated to the north, to his émigré-uncle. He opted for that step fearing that a thorough search for the author of anti-state slogans that appeared on the building of the Town Council would bring the organs of investigation to the doorbell with the family name Miler. His uncle had regularly sent him financial support, which was paid into a bank account by Mrs. Miler, a widow whose husband, immediately before the birth of their son, died on the Island of Goli, with the explanation that he had drowned in the sea. Only a few months before the escape of her twenty-year-old only son she bought a flat with the money, aware that the society in which they were living would never help the offspring of an IB background. Just about the middle of May of sixty-nine, when I decided to leave the students' dorm in which I had been living since I enrolled at the university, Mrs. Miler's son phoned to tell his mother that he did not want to return to "*a country like that*", and she confided this to Petar, moaning, with their morning office-coffee. She asked him to find a decent student, a girl from his home region, whom she would let the flat to. The same evening, at the presentation of the poetry collection by the poet whose verses about the beauty of the lowlands I used to recite at every school festivity in Ivanovo, I met Petar.

That spring I went to the presentations of new books more and more often. Although I didn't see my *neighbor* there, no matter how badly I wished to, I enjoyed spending a few pleasant hours outside my student room.