

Miranda And

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The worst part was having to go out in the snow to use the phone booth at the corner drug store. Her boots leaked, the street was nothing but puddles, the sidewalk was covered with the plowed up hills of dirty ice, but even when Miranda was not at home, Katherine couldn't bring herself to call him on their phone. Miranda knew very well that Katherine sneaked out almost every night to call him, but Katherine couldn't stand the thought of what Miranda's face might do when she saw initials next to the New Hampshire number on the phone bill that weren't, as they had always been before, MB but KH. Katherine knew that something so obvious would probably be the straw that broke whatever back Miranda was using to stand up to her best friend's "affair" with her, Miranda's, lover. No, it was out to the cold phone booth again, another whispered conversation, turning every other second as shadows that might be Miranda shuffled by in the snow. Still, it felt right, tip-toeing away from the house after 11, when the rates were lower. It made it more of a secret, though it wasn't, it made the hurried phone calls something even more forbidden than the romping on the couch downstairs while Miranda was upstairs, asleep. Katherine stepped outside into the New York City slush, wishing she had a black trench coat and a pair of high black leather boots. The army surplus parka was too clumsy, her rubber boots too old.

"John told me all about it. He told me everything. I'm not going to get upset about it, I could see that you were beginning to fall in love with him months ago, I've been watching you, but I never said anything. So I don't see any reason in talking about it now. John says he likes you very much, but he doesn't feel that way about you, he doesn't understand how it could have happened, and he wants me to tell you that he likes you very much but that is all. He told me first thing this morning-- I suspected something like this might be going on when he didn't come upstairs last night--and he really doesn't know what to say to you, he has trouble understanding what happened to make you do that. I don't have any trouble at all understanding why you did it, but as far as I'm concerned it didn't happen at all, as long as it doesn't happen again, and so I don't want

to talk about it. So as long as nothing like that ever happens again, I will try very hard not to be mad at you."

"What?" Miranda and Katherine were riding up in the only elevator in all of State Falls, New Hampshire. "What?" Katherine began to shake. "What?" They were on the 7th floor, Miranda stepped out stiffly, sucking Katherine along with her. "What?" was still all Katherine could say.

Trailing her out the door of the elevator into the room of some man Miranda had grown up with, Katherine felt 8 or 9 eyes in the back of Miranda's head watching

her. "What?" Katherine was trying loyally to understand how Miranda could have gotten so confused, how she could have mistaken whatever John had told her that ridiculous story for the John that Miranda had loved and lived with for most of the past 7 years, the John that had practically seduced her, Katherine, last night. Well, Miranda would have to be unconfused. Whoever had talked to her had obviously not been the John in question. How Miranda had made such a mistake, Katherine couldn't imagine, but that she had made it was certainly not a mark in her favor. Katherine had known him for only a year or so but she wouldn't have let some strange, deranged man come up to her, pretending to be John Harrison, no, she wouldn't have let him get away with it. What was wrong with Miranda, anyway? "What?"

But Miranda wasn't listening, of course not, there was a man talking to her, an attractive man, a man who made John Harrison look like a portion of undercooked scrambled eggs that had fallen on the floor and which somebody had forgotten, for over 28 years, to sweep up. No, this man, Miranda was introducing him to Katherine, his name was Raymond, Hello Raymond, this Raymond was almost too pretty, someone should have wiped all that pink from his cheeks, flattened out his nose a little, cut an inch or two from his black eyelashes. "Raymond is a musician" Miranda was saying, "this is Katherine, my roommate."

"Glad to meet you, Katherine. You a teacher, too?"

"Yes, she works at the same school I do" Miranda said, before Katherine had a chance to unglue her mouth from the half-open, half-wit position it seemed to be stuck in from the last, strangled "What?" which was still all Katherine could think to say.

"You been up for the weekend visiting John, I guess to see the show?" Raymond was talking Miranda over to the couch on the other side of the room, but even though Miranda's back was facing Katherine, she was watching her ? daring her to come over to that couch and sit on the other side of Raymond. A mouth that had clearly formed in the middle of

Miranda's long brown braid was saying loudly "Don't you dare come anywhere near Raymond, this is mine, I'm through sharing, you ungrateful bitch, I just brought you up here to keep an eye on you." So Katherine stayed near the doorway, inspecting a large mono-print portrait that had been hung next to a mirror. It was one of John's; Katherine decided it was interesting, but not all that interesting. She moved on to the mirror.

Looking at her face in the mirror, Katherine sighed happily, realizing that this would be her proof, her obvious and irrefutable proof that she had not been trying to steal little scrawny John Harrison away from Miranda. Katherine hadn't even combed her hair yet that day, it was still tied in a knot on the top of her head, half of it straggling out and all over the place. She still wondered who the hell had told Miranda such a ridiculous story, it hadn't been that way at all, but as soon as Miranda realized her mistake, they would be sure to have a good laugh about it. "Well" Katherine thought, "maybe Miranda won't be ready to laugh about it just yet" remembering that John had spent the night with her on the couch instead of going upstairs to the bedroom where Miranda had waited for him in his double bed. "Maybe Miranda does have a right to be pissed off, she did call down to John, twice, and he yelled back both times that he would be right up and he hadn't, that certainly is reason enough for her to be angry, I wouldn't like that either, but why is she mad at me?" Katherine couldn't understand it. "After all," she concluded, making little clouds on the mirror that blotted out the reflection of Miranda and Raymond on the couch, "I'm not the one she stayed up all night waiting for, why isn't she mad at John?" Katherine had kept telling John that she didn't know if Miranda would like them messing around on the couch, but he had kept telling her that it would be all right. "And I figured, hell, he's the one who's known you all these years, he's going to know better than I do what you mind and what you don't, so I said one last time are you sure and he panted yes and so I said okay, if you're sure and he was very sure by then. So if he was wrong, whose fault is it? Certainly not mine. We didn't do anything, anyway, we just messed around--well, we did mess around alot, but we didn't do anything really, I don't know what that man pretending to be John told you but it must have been pretty bad for you to be acting this way." Katherine shook her head sadly, remembering the mouth in Miranda's braid, thinking that it was too bad this misunderstanding had made Miranda so unhappy.

Because she like Miranda alot. Sure she was temperamental and acted wounded when Katherine had been up late typing, but writing was Katherine's work and she certainly didn't say anything when Miranda

covered the whole living room and the kitchen table with wet prints. Even when Miranda had turned the bathroom into a darkroom while they remodeled the one at school, Katherine hadn't said a word, but had used the Olson's next door when she had to. It hadn't been any fun teaching that Tuesday/Thursday 8:40 without taking a shower first, it made Katherine feel funny, she had lectured with her against the blackboard the whole time, and the chalk still wouldn't come off her favorite blue knit skirt. But why should she complain to Miranda about it? If she had to print in the bathroom she had to. So the way Miranda treated her in the mornings after Katherine had been up till 3 or 4 writing, the way Miranda walked around the kitchen with her legs tight together and her gray bathrobe clutched to her, the way she forgot on those mornings to save the last of the coffee for Katherine but washed it down the sink, that had always bothered Katherine because it confused the way she felt about Miranda. Usually Miranda was so generous and honest.

They got along so well. Katherine respected what Miranda was trying to do with her photography, and even though Miranda wasn't interested in Katherine's work she seemed to respect her writing--that is, except on those mornings. But if Katherine hadn't been typing late the night before, dinner with Miranda was always something to look forward to, sitting around drinking tea and talking about an exhibit in the city or the lithograph John had sent Miranda or a new photographic silk screening process.

Miranda was so alive when she talked about her own art that Katherine didn't try anymore to tell her about hers. Miranda had listened politely, in the beginning, when Katherine had started talking about the things that mattered to her, but now Miranda didn't even stay at the table, she wandered off absentmindedly to crop or mount something or other. So Katherine sat and talked about photography or painting, and sometimes they would stay at the table past midnight. And it was during these talks that Katherine had grown to like Miranda so much. So it upset her that Miranda was mad at her. Even though it would all be cleared up as soon as they got into the elevator, 7 floors would certainly be enough to prove the truth to Miranda, it bothered her that Miranda would be able to feel this way about her no matter what lies some impostor had told her. John Harrison was a nice guy, he did good work, and Katherine loved talking to him about her writing, he was interested in what she was doing, but that didn't mean she was sneaking around in the grass plotting to trip him into bed with her. Fooling around with a friend and lover stealing were two

entirely different things. For she knew Miranda loved him very much, she had loved him ever since the day 7 years ago when his prints had been hung next to hers in an exhibition, prints which had looked so much like what she had thought her own looked like--but hers didn't, not quite--that she had fallen in love with him even before she met him. All their friends agreed that very day that they were the perfect match, and strangers, seeing the 2 sets of prints side by side, were amazed that 2 different artists could have developed a perspective so similar. Several of these strangers had asked Miranda and John how long they had been working together, and who influenced who the most. Miranda and John had just laughed, ignoring the strangers, for John felt for Miranda something that was almost a photographically exact copy of what Miranda felt for him.

Miranda and Raymond linked arms and stood up side by side by the couch. "Next time you're up, stop by and see me before you're ready to leave, okay?" Raymond sure could smile. "I may be coming up next weekend, I really haven't seen much of John lately, I've been so busy with my work." "I thought you two tried to alternate traveling--one weekend here, one weekend in New York?" "Yes, but when John comes to New York there's so much to do and so many people around, you know, we never get any time to ourselves."

"Yea, I know, it's hard finding the time. But why don't you and John stop by for dinner next Saturday?" Raymond and Miranda had progressed to the doorway. "If you--your name's Katherine, right?--if you come up with Miranda I'd be happy to have you too."

"That's very sweet of you to ask, Ray" Miranda said quickly, "but next Saturday I thought John and I would drive up to see his folks, we haven't seen them since Thanksgiving. But why don't you drop by early Sunday afternoon, bring your clarinet?"

"I just might do that, say about 2:30, John's place?"

"That would be great, I know John would love to see you."

"Well, drive safely, it's slick out there--getting dark, too. Nice meeting you, Katherine."

"Nice meeting you."

Then they were inside the elevator, and it took 2 of the 7 floors just for Katherine to pry her lips apart, but she managed to explain everything, very clearly. But by the time the door slid open at the bottom, Miranda had been screaming for over 3 floors.

"It would really be better for both of us if you didn't make things worse by saying ridiculous things that

prove how stupid I was to trust you around John. You think that the fact that you didn't put on any makeup this morning is supposed to make me believe that John seduced you and not the other way around? Really, Katherine. You probably figured you already had John, there was no need to continue dressing up and looking so nice now that you thought you had his attention, and that if you made yourself up nice today I might notice. But don't think I haven't noticed the way you've looked all weekend, your good black sweater, the tight green pants, your favorite dress, your hair. Don't you see that you're mentioning something like this to me is only further proof that you are perfectly aware of what you have been doing? Otherwise you wouldn't even think about saying something like that to me."

"What?" Katherine was back in the what rut again, astounded that Miranda had interpreted her simple effort to be less attractive to John as a calculated attempt to deceive her. Miranda obviously still believed the story the man posturing as John had told her, and that hurt Katherine more than Miranda's anger. Why did Miranda believe something that a stranger had told her, something that was as total an invention as he was, and yet wouldn't even listen to Katherine, a woman who had been her best friend for over 2 years now?

"Miranda, I--what--"

But Miranda cut her off, they were about to get into the car.

"I said I didn't want to talk about it, we are going to have to sit together in this car for the next 5 hours, and I don't see how I am going to be able to stand it if you continue whining and saying things which I know aren't true. Look--I've made it very clear that as long as it doesn't happen again I will not be--I will try not to hate you for it. Because I have no intention of letting something that you have done upset my relationship with John--and he feels the same way. Otherwise he wouldn't have told me--don't you see that proves who started it?"

Katherine couldn't even "what?"

They were in the car, fastening their seatbelts, a necessity when Miranda was driving. It was Miranda's

car, and she didn't like Katherine driving it, so whenever they went somewhere Katherine kept her eyes off the road, knowing it wouldn't do her any good to keep clutching the dash, it only increased the possibility that Miranda would ram them into an embankment or sideswipe a passing car. It had taken Miranda 2 years and 17 tries to pass her driving test, before that John had driven her everywhere, but when she had moved to New York she couldn't depend on him anymore. Katherine had met Miranda during the middle of the endless driving tests, and had driven Miranda where she had to go for almost a year. But Miranda resented Katherine when she had to rely on her, and though Katherine had offered many times to take Miranda out to a large parking lot to practice, she had never let Katherine help her. Katherine figured it was a matter of pride, so she never complained about Miranda's driving, knowing that John gave her enough grief about it. "But it's strange" Katherine suddenly thought as Miranda stalled the car twice while backing up, "when John kids her about her driving, she almost seems to enjoy it."

So they didn't talk about it all the long way home, they didn't talk about anything, Katherine read a book and Miranda drove uncharacteristically fast, breaking the speed limit whenever she got the chance.

Katherine was halfway to the corner drug store, her feet were already half frozen, Miranda wouldn't let her borrow her old boots anymore, she kept them hidden in her closet now and not on the mat near the door. "I guess that's the price you pay" Katherine said to herself, half-jokingly.

2 days after they had gotten home, Miranda had come into Katherine's room. The 2 days had been very hard for Katherine, for she knew Miranda too well not to know when Miranda was hurting, and she was hurting badly now. John was the first and only man Miranda had ever loved and made love to, he meant more to Miranda than--or at least as much as her photography, and the thought that she might not have him always was breaking Miranda up into brittle pieces of glass that Katherine could hear shattering even with her door closed. That sound made Katherine want to go to Miranda, to comfort her, tell her not to worry about that

other woman, whoever she was, John didn't love anyone but Miranda, Miranda was an artist, like he was, she didn't have to worry, she knew John didn't love the other woman-- and here came one very good reason why Katherine couldn't open her door and go to Miranda. She knew John didn't love the other woman, the woman who was tearing out Miranda's teeth and hair and eyes just in the room next to hers, but she knew that John didn't love the other woman because she was the other woman. Miranda hadn't believed her before and she probably wouldn't believe her now. And the other good reason why she didn't stand and knock on Miranda's door was because Miranda had asked her not to, had told her to stop every time she had tried to explain.

So it wasn't until Miranda came into Katherine's room, without knocking, had walked over to Katherine's desk where she sat working, and said, with her face almost broken, "I want to talk to you about it" that Katherine was finally able to explain what had really happened, warning Miranda about the man who had pretended to be John, and try to convince Miranda that what had happened between her and the real John was nothing more than a logical extension-- not so logical with Miranda in the picture, admittedly-- but a natural extension of simple friendship.

That seemed to Katherine the most important thing to make Miranda understand--that she did not love John, never had, never wanted to, John didn't love anyone but Miranda, what they had done on a couch in the moonlight had not touched, it could never touch what Miranda and John shared, it had not been meant to. If it upset Miranda so much, Katherine would see to it that it never happened again, that would be an easy thing to promise, and an easy promise to keep, because Miranda's friendship mattered so much more to Katherine than John's did, and Katherine told her so.

Katherine saw that Miranda's face seemed to smooth out a bit when she said the part about promising, so she said it again. Miranda's face got very smooth after the second time.

"I just talked to John, he said--well, he said, well, he explained things a little differently than he did on Sunday morning. He said he was so afraid of hurting

me, that's why he had to make it seem like you were the one who had started it all. But today he told me what really happened. And I've been thinking about it, thinking about why he wanted to--to make love to you, and I guess 7 years is a long time for a man to be with one woman, they feel like they're missing something even when they love the woman they're with. I know he loves me, and I know I'll never love anyone but him. I know he will come back to me, I know I'm what he wants, I know it's just that we have been together for so long, and he can't help wanting what he doesn't have. So I told him to go ahead, to do what he wants, otherwise he'll resent me for it, and I couldn't stand that, I don't want him to ever think that I am trying to tie him down. So I told him to go ahead and do what he wants, because if I try to stop him it will only make him want it more. He doesn't really want it, he doesn't really want you, he just thinks he does, I know because I know what he wants, I've always known what he wants." Miranda took a deep breath, waiting for Katherine to say something, and as she waited her face began to cave inward again.

Katherine had expected an apology from Miranda, and since she was so sure that once the real John told Miranda the real story of that night on the couch, Miranda would apologize immediately, Katherine accepted what Miranda had just said to her as Miranda's way of saying she was sorry. Katherine knew it must be very hard for Miranda to admit to her that she had mistaken someone else for John, and so she didn't feel angry anymore at Miranda's lack of faith in her, but instead concentrated on smoothing out Miranda's face, which was cracked and hollow, practically crumbling as she sat on the edge of Katherine's bed.

Katherine began to talk to Miranda, saying all the things she had said before, trying to remember exactly what it was she had said that had smoothed out Miranda's face, and once before erased all the pain that Katherine didn't doubt would split Miranda's face any second now if she didn't find the words to wipe it away. She told Miranda how she had not thought she would hurt Miranda by lying on the couch with John, how, too, John had assured her that it would be all right, how she had pushed him off the couch

the second time Miranda had called from upstairs, begging him to go, so afraid Miranda would be mad at him, how she had spent hours trying to get John to agree to go up and talk about it to her, how she had refused to make love, saying over and over to John that certain things were all right and certain things weren't between people who were friends, especially with Miranda upstairs.

And Katherine explained slowly to Miranda how confused she had been when Miranda had come down the stairs of John's house that Sunday morning, her legs tight together and John's plaid robe clutched to her neck with both hands, and had said nothing to Katherine but "Good Morning" so stilted, Katherine explained so slowly to Miranda how she had not understood why, no matter who started it, why Miranda was mad at her and not at John. Why had she instantly hated and blamed Katherine, who owed Miranda no sexual allegiance but had given it to her anyway, given it to her out of friendship, why had she believed everything the false John had told her, and had not hated him for trying to betray an allegiance which he had sworn over and over to her for the past 7 years and which only Katherine's love for Miranda, not his love, had kept him from breaking.

Miranda was sitting on the bed. She was trying, very politely, to listen. But her face was as horribly crushed as it had been when Katherine had begun talking. So Katherine stopped talking, and tried to remember what it was that she had said before that had seemed to calm Miranda so much. Suddenly she remembered, and looked up at Miranda happily, ready to smooth Miranda's face back to beauty, so pleased to have found the way to help this woman out of her pain.

That was when Katherine saw Miranda for the first time, saw that Miranda didn't care about any of the things Katherine had been trying to tell her, didn't care about . Katherine, didn't care about anything but John, didn't want anything from Katherine except John. And Katherine, sitting at her desk, feeling cheated and alone, feeling the uselessness of all her honesty and concern for a woman who had never really talked to her, had never cared what she had

been thinking, had gone with her to concerts and exhibitions only because her loyalty to John prevented her from going with a man, had not apologized to her 5 minutes ago and didn't understand that she should have, suddenly Katherine didn't care about smoothing out Miranda's face anymore. That was John's duty, that was his right, it wasn't anybody else's, it wasn't Katherine's, and she didn't intend to do for Miranda something that she had never been allowed to do before. Not when what Miranda was asking for had nothing to do with Katherine, had nothing to do with their friendship, had nothing to do with the 2 years they had spent together, 2 years of being Miranda's second best, a cheap substitute, someone to talk to who would not demand sex in return.

Katherine would have started crying, but there was nothing to cry about, all the tears she had cried for Miranda's pain were tears that didn't matter to Miranda, and now tears for her own pain were equally meaningless. Katherine couldn't promise what she had so readily promised 5 minutes before. Miranda left, her face a frightening criss-cross of caverns and craters, but Katherine no longer heard the terrible sounds she made, breaking into little shards and splinters in the next room.

"Still, there are some things you just don't do, no matter what." Katherine said to herself as she entered the phone booth, keeping the door open so that the light wouldn't go on. She called collect, tonight it was his turn to pay.

"Hello, John?"

"Katherine. I'm really glad you called. Listen, I just got off the phone with Miranda, and she's getting..."

It always began the same, complaints about Miranda, which Katherine didn't want to hear, and it always ended the same, with John trying to convince Katherine that it would be best for all if she would sleep with him. Well, Katherine didn't doubt that it would be better, in the end, for Miranda, and for John, if she did sleep with him, it would get her out of his system, he could go back to his domestic affair with Miranda with the confidence that he was a free man after all. But a lover wasn't what

Katherine wanted when she had ended up on the couch with John that night, and she was no longer interested in Miranda's happiness. If she had been, she might have slept with him, even though it went against all the feelings of loyalty which even now she couldn't separate from her feelings about Miranda. No, Miranda's feelings hadn't been that important to John when it came down to his own, and the only thing that Katherine was concerned about now was that her friendship with John was getting too confused with his desire to make some sort of symbolic break with Miranda. So she refused, very gently, to make love with him, knowing somehow that it would make him want her more. Maybe Miranda had taught her something, given her something after all.

"Maybe in 5 or 10 years, John. Not now."

Gradually, Katherine knew, John would either come to understand or forget what she was trying to say and why she had been with him on his couch, he would go back to Miranda, and everything would be the same--except for one thing. Katherine knew it wasn't really his fault, it was Miranda's, if you looked at it objectively, since it wasn't John's responsibility if Miranda cared about no one but him. Still, she couldn't keep the bitterness out of her voice sometimes when she told him to stop complaining about Miranda, or when she got tired of his constant pleading. She blamed him anyway.

"Listen, John, I've got to go, it's damn cold out here you know. I'll see you Friday night, the train will probably be late, so I guess a little after midnight."

"Does Miranda know you're coming?"

"Sure, she didn't ask but I told her."

"Why did you do that?"

"Because I--I tell her all the time I'm not sleeping with you, but she doesn't believe that either. Anyway, that's her problem."

"Miranda has never been able to accept the fact that--"

"Look John, I said I didn't want to hear about it. I'll see you Friday. Goodnight."

"Katherine--look, I'm really glad you're coming. I guess it's hard for you, living with her, seeing her

everyday. I'm--I'm just glad you're coming."

"Yeah. Me too."

Back again through the slush. Miranda would probably be home by now, she wouldn't ask where Katherine had been, but she would know, and she would show Katherine that she knew. But, considering it all, Katherine decided that Miranda's face didn't hurt her that much anymore.

"Either Miranda lets me borrow her old boots" Katherine concluded, stamping her numb feet, "or next time I'm calling him from the house."