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Miriam

The Story

Mrs. H. T. Miller is a widow who lives alone in a small apartment near the East River in New York City. She dresses simply and wears no makeup. She spends her days cleaning her apartment, fixing her own meals, tending her canary, and smoking an occasional cigarette. One evening, she decides to go to the movies.

While waiting in line at the box office, she becomes aware of a thin little girl standing nearby. Mrs. Miller is struck by the girl's old-fashioned clothes and her silver-white hair. The girl hands her some money and asks her to buy a ticket for her. Mrs. Miller complies without really knowing why and even feels guilty, as if she has done something wrong. Inside the theater, Mrs. Miller gets a closer look at the girl and decides that her most distinctive feature is her eyes, which are large, unblinking, and adultlike. During the few minutes before the film starts, they have a brief conversation; the girl says that her name is Miriam, which happens to be Mrs. Miller's first name, and that she has never seen a film before.

One snowy night a week later, just as Mrs. Miller curls up in bed with a hot-water bottle and a newspaper, the doorbell rings. She tries to ignore it, but when the noise becomes one unceasing ring, she goes to the door to put a stop to it and finds Miriam on her doorstep. The girl barges into the living room and takes charge. As at their last meeting, her dress is old-fashioned, but this time it is white silk. Mrs. Miller marvels over such a costume on a cold February night. She marvels even more over Miriam's rude behavior as the girl goes around the room pronouncing judgment on various items. Miriam tries to uncover the cage of the canary to make him sing, but Mrs. Miller stops her. When Miriam says she is hungry and demands food, Mrs. Miller agrees to feed her on the understanding that Miriam will eat and then leave.

While she is in the kitchen fixing sandwiches, Mrs. Miller hears the canary singing and is furious. When she returns with the sandwiches, she finds the canary cage still covered and Miriam snooping in her jewel case. Miriam says there is nothing good there but a cameo brooch and demands that Mrs. Miller give it to her. At that moment, Mrs. Miller realizes just how much she is at the mercy of this sinister little girl. Once she has eaten, Miriam is about to leave, wearing the cameo brooch, when she asks Mrs. Miller for a kiss good-night. When Mrs. Miller refuses, Miriam seizes a vase containing paper flowers and hurls it to the floor, where it shatters. Then she stamps on the bouquet, walks to the door, gives Mrs. Miller a look of "slyly innocent curiosity," and leaves.

Mrs. Miller spends the next day in bed, but on the following day, she awakens to springlike weather and decides to go shopping. She is in a holiday mood until she encounters a deformed old man who stalks her until she escapes into a florist's shop. On an impulse, she buys six white roses, then stops by a glassware store to buy a vase, and a bakery to buy some sweets. Throughout this escapade, she feels that she is following some prearranged plan.

At home, she sets things out as if she is expecting someone; promptly at five, the doorbell rings. When Miriam demands to be let in, Mrs. Miller lights a cigarette and refuses to open the door. After the ringing stops and she thinks the coast is clear, she opens the door a crack, only to find Miriam sitting on a cardboard

box with a doll cradled in her arms. Miriam interprets the flowers and sweets as a sign of welcome and announces that she plans to move in. The box, she says, as Mrs. Miller obediently drags it inside, contains her clothes.

Distraught, Mrs. Miller runs down the hall for help, but when a neighbor checks out the apartment, he can find no trace of Miriam. Fearfully, Mrs. Miller returns to her apartment and, seeing that Miriam and her belongings are not there, begins to wonder if she has ever really known a girl named Miriam. With a sense of relief, she realizes that with the apparition gone, she can reclaim her identity, for she is sure she has been suffering only a temporary lapse. Just as she is giving in to this contented feeling, she is aware of sounds from the next room, of drawers opening and closing, followed by the murmur of a silk dress moving toward the doorway.

Themes and Meanings

Truman Capote's own interpretation of this story is that Miriam is a part of Mrs. Miller herself, the terrifying creation of a woman drifting into schizophrenia. The story presents evidence of a woman who, in her grief and loneliness, conjures up images from her own childhood. Miriam's clothes are like those that Mrs. Miller would have worn in her childhood, a time when there would have been no films. It is possible that Mrs. Miller was once demanding and impertinent. There is much more to this story, however, than the mere case study of a split personality.

It is clear from the outset that Mrs. Miller is not a stereotypical recluse living behind locked doors in dark, untidy rooms. Her apartment is described as a pleasant one in a recently remodeled building. She is a widow, but there is a mention only of adequate insurance, not of insurmountable grief. Although she may have narrow interests and no close friends, she gets out to the grocery store once in a while, occasionally takes in a film, and even goes shopping. Her life is no different from countless other lives, especially in a big city. Capote says that "her activities were seldom spontaneous," that she rarely does more than clean house, fix food, tend her canary, and smoke an occasional cigarette. It may sound like a life of quiet desperation but not one of impending madness.

Miriam's initial appearances occur under fairly normal circumstances: while Mrs. Miller stands in line at a movie theater and just after she curls up in bed with the newspaper. These are not moments of stress or depression. In both instances, Mrs. Miller seems sane enough and quite contented. It is only on the occasion of Miriam's last visit to the apartment—when the girl arrives with a box of clothes, prepared to move in—that Mrs. Miller becomes filled with anxiety. Rather than give in to Miriam, Mrs. Miller does the smart thing: She goes for help. The neighbors do not take her for a crazy woman. Instead, they comfort her and offer to check things out for her.

It is not until Mrs. Miller returns to her apartment alone and finds Miriam still there that her mental state suggest psychosis. From the next room, she hears the rustle of a silk dress moving nearer, swelling in intensity; she feels the walls trembling with vibrations and the room caving under a wave of whispers. As she stares into the face of this fragile child with the hair and eyes of an old woman, she may either be surrendering to some sort of madness, or she may be facing the overwhelming reality of what has come to be, for her, a meaningless existence.

Style and Technique

Capote likes to deal in ambiguity. A favorite technique of his is to introduce a bizarre element into an ordinary scene or story and let it fester. Miriam is such an irrational element, one that can intrude on an orderly life for no apparent reason, the capricious agent of diabolical fate, blithely defying one's insistence on rational explanations.

Another irrational element in the story is the deformed old man who stalks Mrs. Miller while she is on her shopping spree. Whoever he is, he serves as a catalyst in the story, propelling it to a harrowing conclusion where all the bizarre elements unite to push Mrs. Miller over the edge. It is not until Miriam mentions having lived with a very poor old man that Mrs. Miller finally breaks down and runs for help, for she knows intuitively that it must be the same old man. This means that both he and Miriam can only be figments of her imagination—demons of her deepest dreads.

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