

Her Husband's Ex

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Although Ken had never introduced her to his ex-wife nor even discussed her very much at all, his wife knew a great deal about Sonya. In fact, Caitlin knew much more about her husband's ex than she really should have done.

In a sense, Ken was as much to blame as Caitlin's curiosity and jealousy. He was the one with the woeful understanding of data security. Had it never crossed his mind that his wife of two years' marriage and a total of three years' acquaintance might want to know more about Sonya? After all, they'd been married for over seven years.

When Caitlin first met Ken at that fateful office party, he was a huddled diminished figure still moping about his recent divorce to his first wife—and clearly not yet reconciled to it. Nevertheless, Ken revealed to his second wife only the sketchiest of details about the woman who had been central to his life for so long, a woman whose name occasionally and accidentally surfaced during their lovemaking, and to whom she sometimes felt as if she were just a successor. But she wasn't Sonya Version 2. She wasn't just an upgrade from the previous model. She was her own independent woman, even if it was an independence that had persisted more or less uninterrupted all her life until she met Ken.

Originally, it must have been quite different for Ken and Sonya. They were both marketing executives, more at home with the nonsense they were responsible for mailing to existing or potential customers than they were with the real facts they also gathered about the public's perception of the products they marketed. Neither of them worked in an industry where results were tested by an army of analysts rather than by vacuous statistics. Caitlin worked as a systems administrator and couldn't understand

the ethos of a profession focused on customer perception and market penetration rather than such reliable indicators as productivity and reliability.

However, just as Caitlin had no real appreciation for the value of marketing neither had Ken any but the most rudimentary knowledge about the operating system or software on the laptop computers he'd acquired over the years, either for personal use or for work. He never bothered with passwords unless they were mandatory and, even then, he invariably used the same three letters for the password as he did for his first name. And Ken stored everything on his laptops, which was secure only in that the data was never backed up and therefore could only be found on the laptop on which the files were first created.

At first, it was mere nosiness that tempted Caitlin to turn on Ken's laptop when he wasn't home and skim through the directories that radiated from his *My Documents* folder. They'd been living together for three months by then and Ken had just the night before proposed marriage. It was only to be expected that Caitlin might want to explore Ken's computer to discover all the facts about her fiancé that he had been so reluctant to divulge.

And that was the first time that Caitlin ever saw an image of Sonya. As his ex-wife's marriage to Ken had been a childless one, despite all those years of opportunity and effort, there had never been a good reason for Ken to see her again and Caitlin could see even less reason why she should be invited to their wedding. The Sonya in the hundreds of photos stored haphazardly in Ken's *My Pictures* folder was a woman who, Caitlin was gratified to see, she resembled in almost no detail. Sonya was a slight woman with short dark hair and with almost nothing to match Caitlin's rather

more splendid bosom. She dressed in jeans and tee-shirts—but, like almost everyone Caitlin had met in marketing, was eager to flaunt the designer labels of her otherwise undistinguished clothes. The thin nose on her small face was brilliantly complemented by a perfect set of teeth and wide green eyes. It didn't comfort Caitlin one bit to admit that Sonya was a very pretty woman. And, although no one could say that Caitlin was unattractive, even if she was less slim than her predecessor in marriage, Sonya was patently the prettier of her husband's two wives.

Caitlin resisted the temptation to delete the photo files from Ken's hard drive, even if their memory was so vivid when she regarded the rather fewer photos of her that Ken took on his digital camera and mobile phone. How could Ken bear to be parted from Sonya? However much Caitlin resisted the calories, however much she spent on manicures and haircuts, however much she invested in face cream and make-up, she could never hope to match Sonya's unadorned beauty. She ruffled her blonde hair over her face or pulled it tightly back. She drew in her breath so that her breasts became even more prominent and her stomach temporarily less so. But whatever she did couldn't change the facts. Ken had left a woman that few men would ever be so lucky to have known and was now living with a woman who very few men before him had ever chosen to sleep with.

No wonder Ken had found the break-up so difficult.

"Why did you and Sonya separate?" Caitlin asked Ken after they had made love and he was at his most vulnerable.

"Divorce," corrected Ken bitterly, with a grunt.

"Divorce, then," said Caitlin, not to be distracted. "Why?"

"Well, you know," said Ken as inarticulate and evasive as ever. "Things. Stuff. It just wasn't to be."

"Did she split from you or did you split from her?" Caitlin persisted.

"Neither. Both. I don't know. Mutual. Why do you ask?"

"I just want to know about the man I'm about to marry," said Caitlin, tweaking her fiancé's still slightly tumescent penis. "Is there some dark secret I should know about? Why did you and your ex-wife divorce? Was there something you did?"

"Erm..." said Ken, whose penis was beginning to twitch with reawakened desire. "It wasn't me."

"Are you sure?" asked Caitlin with a teasing smile as she cupped Ken's testicles in her palm and pecked her lips on its awakening glans. "You weren't unfaithful, were you? You weren't playing the field?"

"No, I wasn't," confessed Ken. "It wasn't me who was unfaithful. It was Sonya."

"And who was she unfaithful with?" persisted Caitlin, pushing her advantage as she lifted herself up over her fiancé. "Not your best friend, was it? The usual cliché?"

"No, not at all," said Ken increasingly desperate to return to the lovemaking Caitlin was directing his desire towards. "It was a work colleague. Someone in advertising."

When Caitlin next accessed her fiancé's laptop, she pored through the photos for any evidence of the man from advertising that tempted Sonya from her husband. But, although Sonya was photographed with many men, both friends and colleagues,

there was no man whom Sonya seemed any closer to than the husband so clearly besotted with her.

Caitlin still had access to Ken's private data after they married, though there was no evidence of Sonya on the newer laptops and a great deal more of Caitlin. Which is how it should be. Sonya was becoming a progressively distant memory and Caitlin was now the woman in Ken's life. But was it merely a guilty and secret jealousy that returned Caitlin to those old photos on Ken's old Sony Vaio? And why did she have a persistent curiosity about her husband's former life? Caitlin recognised it as a symptom of her insecurity. After all, she had got together with Ken on his rebound. What was there to ensure that she wouldn't just be wife number two in what could be an ever-longer series of wives stretching into the future?

Every now and then, Caitlin would turn on Ken's old laptop and scan through the pictures stored there. Unlike printed copies they didn't fade at all with time and looked as fresh and immediate as when they were first taken on what must once have been an expensive digital camera. And there was Sonya, smiling and tightly gripping Ken's hand. Or was Ken responsible the one for the tight grip? There was something desperate about it. His body language didn't suggest confidence and contentment. He must have known the end of their relationship was nigh. But who was the one who would take his wife from him?

“Don’t you know?” said Ken’s marketing colleague, Vincent, when Caitlin discreetly asked him while her husband was in the pub toilet. “You two have been together yonks and you don’t know! It was quite a scandal in its own small way.”

“What was?” asked Caitlin, anxiously eyeing the swing door where Ken had

left the crowded pub. He wasn't a man who usually wasted time on the lavatory.

"The person who Sonya left Ken for wasn't a man at all," said Vincent.

"A woman?" guessed Caitlin.

"I guess it couldn't be anything else, could it?" said Vincent. "It's not likely to be something other than a man or a woman. Yeah, it was Liz. What's more, she worked for our company. Not for Sonya's. She's still around—though, luckily for Ken, she's not based in the Burgess Street office. Advertising moved over to North Road about two years ago. Just before you and Ken got married."

Caitlin nodded. Then she noticed the toilet door open and Ken emerge. He was shaking the dampness off his hands that the drier hadn't blown away.

"Don't tell Ken I asked," hissed Caitlin. "I don't want him to think I've been prying or anything."

"Of course not," said Vincent standing up to let Ken squeeze through to the seat next to Caitlin. "Want another drink?" he asked the couple. "It's my round."

This new revelation radically changed Caitlin's view of the people who surrounded Sonya in the photographs on Ken's hard drive. It wasn't a man she was looking for in the smiling posed figures that tempted Sonya away from her husband. And it wasn't one of Sonya's less frequently featured friends or colleagues. It was one of those sharp-dressed advertising women who hovered around the periphery of Ken's marketing colleagues. But which one?

Was it the woman in the too-short skirt and the too-red lipstick? Was it the one with the twiggy legs that were not at all flattering in her ridiculously short skirt? Was it the slightly chubby woman in checked trousers and short hair? It was a cliché, of

course, to assume that Sonya's lesbian lover would have short hair and wear trousers.

Plenty of straight women preferred to cut their hair short and not wear a skirt. It might well be that the woman whose qualities were deemed greater than even those of Ken's might be the woman with mousy hair that fell straight onto her shoulders and had a predilection for lace and tortoise-shell.

Up until now, Caitlin had viewed Sonya as some kind of a rival. She wasn't a rival in the sense that she and Sonya were actively vying for her husband's hand in marriage, but more one for the primacy of his affection. Caitlin never before had any real sympathy for the woman, although she reluctantly recognised a debt of gratitude to Sonya's infidelity for releasing Ken from wedlock and blessing Caitlin with three years of pre-nuptial and marital bliss. It was true that Caitlin found Sonya attractive, but that had rather the opposite effect of endearing the woman to her. Only now had Caitlin discovered an unsuspected allegiance with her husband's ex that softened her hitherto negative attitude.

Despite her love for Ken and her undeniable appetite for sex with him, there had been a time in Caitlin's adolescence when she wasn't convinced that this was the flavour of sex for which she was destined. Caitlin wasn't certain she found men attractive at all. Although her friends gushed about the supposed merits of the boys they fancied, whether in real life or in the movies, whether exhibited in the school playing field or in the glossy girls' magazines, Caitlin wasn't convinced. She had less difficulty in appreciating the allure of other women, a preference that still remained with her however much she now associated sexual satisfaction with a man's body and, most of all, his penis.

But, in these early confused days when Caitlin's bosom merely hinted at the glories to come, when her closest friends and confidantes were other girls and when boys were distantly viewed acne-covered figures, Caitlin was persuaded that it might be other girls rather than boys towards whom she was most drawn. However, despite a few discouraging fumbles and an embarrassed kiss and cuddle with her closest friends, this phase of Caitlin's youth was soon behind her. She now believed she was heterosexual and that, although she still didn't really find much physical appeal in men, there was a whole lot that more than compensated. After all, what tackle did a woman carry that could compare with what a man had between his legs?

Caitlin's interest in her husband's ex-wife remained mostly academic until she noticed a new and different pattern emerge in Ken's behaviour. The bouquets of roses and the passionate lovemaking may have been designed to allay Caitlin's suspicions—but combined as they were with late night meetings in the office and a new need to work extra hours they had rather the opposite effect. Caitlin had read her women's magazines carefully and knew that it was a common phenomenon for a cheating husband to try and compensate for his guilt by being more rather than less romantic with his wife. And, in any case, Caitlin detected cat's hairs on Ken's suit. They didn't own a cat and none were likely to be wandering about the office. There was also a slight whiff of perfume quite unlike any that Caitlin used but which invariably accompanied Ken after a late night out. And always the same brand of perfume.

It would be a waste of time to confront Ken directly. It might, after all, precipitate exactly the breakdown in their relationship that Caitlin dreaded most. Instead, she took the easier option of logging onto her husband's poorly secured

laptops. Caitlin was able not only to browse through the data files Ken had saved, but also to view his mail. In any case, the files were generally rather boring. There were a few downloaded pictures and movies that did little more than confirm to Caitlin that her husband shared the same general sexual fantasies as most other men. The e-mails stored in *Outlook* were not really much more interesting. Ken was no more forthcoming and articulate in print than he was in person. However, when Caitlin switched to Internet Explorer and clicked on the *Hotmail* bookmark then she found what she was looking for.

In truth, it wasn't that compromising. The woman that Ken was corresponding with—assuming that *Q18-Sunshine* was a femalenym—was quite discreet and Ken—imaginatively known here as *Ken123456*—stretched his prose only as far as specifying dates and places at which they could meet. But what disturbed Caitlin the most was that although the woman Ken wrote to had anym beginning with a different letter, she signed off as *S* and was addressed as such by Ken—who signed off, inevitably, as *K*.

However, nothing was conclusive. Many women's names began with *S*, not just Sonya, and it was just possible—although this was an increasingly slim hope—that Ken was not so much having an affair but simply a platonic friendship that he understandably didn't want his jealous wife to know about. But when, one day, Caitlin found Ken's mobile phone lying on the floor while he was watching a football match on television, the temptation to find out more was overwhelming.

The phone was no more secure than the laptop and Caitlin had no difficulty in scanning through the list of received and sent calls. There were rather a lot associated

with the single initial 'S'. There were also many associated with 'C', which Caitlin assumed was herself, but that was little comfort to her. Who was 'S'?

"Ken!" answered an excited female voice at the end of the line when Caitlin speed-dialled the number. The respondent obviously also kept a name in her list of Contacts.

"Sonya," said a rather less excited voice when Caitlin redialled the number from her landline, after she had abruptly cut off the earlier call. "Hello. Who is it?" the voice asked more cautiously as Caitlin paused while she wondered what to say.

"It's Ken's wife," said Caitlin baldly.

There was embarrassed silence from the other end of the line, followed by a hesitant: "Erm...?"

"I found your number on Ken's phone," continued Caitlin.

"It was you who just...?"

"Yes."

"Erm...?"

"I think we've got something to talk about," said Caitlin.

"Yes," said the thoughtful voice at the other end. "Caitlin, isn't it? Yes. I guess we *do* have something to discuss..."

In the many films and television programmes Caitlin had seen, few of them gave her any practical advice on how best to react to her current situation. Generally, the bad news of discovering one's husband's infidelity was associated with a scene cut-off usually accompanied by some kind of a tune. This would sometimes be melodramatic, sometimes melancholic and never celebratory. However, when Caitlin

put down the phone she didn't burst into tears, as she always imagined she would. Nor did she feel especially inclined to smash any crockery. Several cups and plates had already been secretly destroyed on the basis of rather less conclusive evidence of her husband's infidelity. In fact, Caitlin felt something rather akin to excitement in her anticipation of at last meeting her husband's ex.

Ken didn't suspect a thing. Caitlin imagined he'd make the perfect foil in a movie about aliens masquerading as normal people. The only thing he did notice was Caitlin's renewed enthusiasm for sex. This was not quite what Caitlin imagined would be the case. Wasn't she supposed to be tearful, resentful and, above all, reluctant to indulge in that most intimate of intimacies? Instead, she persuaded her husband to fuck her more and for longer and with more variety than she normally did. Anal intercourse was usually a special treat, reserved for anniversaries, but as Ken's penis slid into her from behind Caitlin reflected that fairly soon there may no longer be a suitable occasion.

When Caitlin lay on her side with her back to her husband's back as Ken breathed gently in his sleep, the thoughts that preoccupied her were as perverse as any she'd ever had. She had an image in her mind, not so much of letting rip with her bitterness and anger at Sonya when the two would meet, but of something altogether different. After all, Sonya was an extremely attractive woman and it was unlikely that Ken would ever truly lose his love for the woman he'd lived with for so long. Perhaps the only way to resolve the situation would not be by conflict and eventually, almost certainly, another divorce—only this time rather more acrimonious—but by some kind of compromise. And given that Sonya was so beautiful and, Caitlin had to admit,

exactly the sort of woman she could envisage getting to know in a physical way, perhaps there was a satisfactory outcome that would be amenable to all interested parties. To Sonya. To Caitlin. And, given the nature of some of the images stored on his laptop, of some satisfaction to Ken—the apex of this triangle.

When sleep eventually overwhelmed Caitlin in the early hours, the erotic image that remained with her was not of Ken's penis thrusting into her but one of the more innocent photos on the laptop of an office party which showed Sonya smiling and laughing in the arms of one of her female colleagues.

“It's Sonya, isn't it?” asked Caitlin the following day of the slender woman who was nervously looking around at the sofas arraigned in the Starbucks where they'd agreed to meet. She was wearing a denim jacket and crushed velvet trousers, and what Caitlin thought was a terribly pretentious peaked cap over her short hair.

The woman nodded her head. “Yes,” she said nervously. “I'm here. You know. Here to face the music.”

The two women sat next to each other on the double sofa that was all that remained available in the relatively crowded coffee shop that Saturday lunchtime. Ken was with his friends, preparing to watch a football match in the living room of a friend whose long-suffering wife was either more accommodating than Caitlin or had found ways of being elsewhere when her home was invaded by a mass of testosterone and alcohol.

Both women had rehearsed their lines and contemplated their respective strategies. Caitlin recognised from her husband the marketing mentality in Sonya's approach, which was essentially to emphasise the positive aspects of the situation

while glossing over the negatives. Not that there were many such positives. But what the two women had in common was that they had both independently reconciled themselves to admitting that mistakes had been made and to finding a painless way out of the situation.

“You must understand,” said Sonya, who Caitlin found steadily more enchanting as she became less tense and more relaxed. “Ken and I...We were married for so long... It was sort of inevitable... I know it’s not good for you, but...”

“It’s not that I don’t understand,” said Caitlin who found Sonya’s habit of fiddling with her dangling ear-rings endearing, even while reflecting that the same personality tic could just as easily be considered irritating. “But why then did you leave Ken for... for this other... Why did you leave him for this woman?”

“You mean Liz? Yes, I thought... Well, I’d always been attracting to women... I thought she was the one. But it just didn’t work out in the end.”

“And why was that?”

“I guess I wasn’t as much a lesbian as I thought I was.”

“Oh!” said Caitlin, who was actually quite disappointed by this discovery.

The conversation with Sonya went remarkably well. That is, considering that the two women were ostensibly on opposing sides of what was a situation with no room for compromise. Sonya’s view, and one which Caitlin couldn’t really argue with, was that, in practical terms, it was Ken who would have to decide. Sonya might agree to no longer see Ken, but would Ken necessarily agree not to see Sonya? And Caitlin made it fairly clear that she would much rather that Ken stayed with her, however much she privately believed it unlikely.

"I live just round the corner," said Sonya when the two women had stared long enough at their empty mugs of mocachino. "We can continue discussing things there."

Caitlin's heart jumped. What was there left to discuss? Surely this was just an excuse which would be a prelude to realising the sexual triangle whose possibilities she had been subconsciously considering as she studied Sonya's small tapering fingers, her long arching neck and that little mole just under her lip?

However, when Caitlin followed Sonya up three flights of stairs to her small one-bedroom apartment just two streets behind the main road, she soon knew for sure that sex was most certainly not uppermost in Sonya's mind. At least, not sex with Caitlin. It was more an opportunity to break open a bottle of Argentinean red wine, sit on her battered old sofa and, against the backdrop of a wall lined with paperbacks and CDs lit up by countless low wattage lamps. And for Sonya to reminisce about her life with Ken, agonise about her foolishness in divorcing him, and apologise, profusely, for having resuscitated their relationship.

While Caitlin sat opposite Sonya, sipping her wine and regarding the CD collection that in so many ways was much more to her husband's taste and not at all her own, she contemplated the facts of her situation. It was no longer theoretical. It was real. Sonya wasn't going to leave Ken. And Ken wasn't going to leave Sonya. It was Caitlin who was the anomaly in the triangle, not Sonya. All that was required was for her to step aside so that Sonya and Ken could resume their relationship from where they left off. Then they could cuddle up on the sofa listening to those awful Oasis albums, watch those horrible Robin Williams movies and, no doubt, also watch those violent American television programmes that Ken loved and Caitlin found so

disagreeable. And that huge white cat cuddled up against the radiator could now shed its fur on Ken's suits with impunity.

It was halfway through the second bottle of wine that the time came for Caitlin to leave. Sonya was now rather maudlin as she reflected on the love for Ken she claimed to have now accepted would never be the same again. In any case, Caitlin knew she *really* must get home, although she was far too inebriated to confront her husband about his infidelity this evening. A conversation with Ken after he had spent an afternoon of drinking cans of beer with his friends was unlikely to be very productive.

That confrontation would have to wait until tomorrow.

"So it's up to Ken," slurred Sonya as she accompanied her guest to the door.

Caitlin hesitated. All through the previous hour she had got steadily quieter and more reserved. What was there for her to say? She had maintained the pretence, partly for own sake as well as for Sonya's, that this was an incident that could be patched over. And, inappropriate as it must have been, Caitlin's thoughts vacillated from imagining her husband having sex with his ex to imagining what it would be like for Sonya and her to be making love. Never, curiously enough, of the three of them in bed together. She gazed into Sonya's eyes as she stood by the door, and past her at the room where they had been sitting for so long and where she had mostly spent her time looking for evidence of Ken, not only as the philandering husband but also as the man whose earlier soulmate was the beautiful woman in front of her.

She knew Sonya was saying something. It seemed to be yet more of the stream of apologies by which she had been purging herself of guilt. But what Caitlin wanted

to do was take advantage of the small and vanishing window of opportunity that would surely be closed altogether once she and Ken separated and had initiated the legal proceedings that she now knew was inevitable, and which she was already relishing as her revenge on the man for stealing three years of her life.

Caitlin squeezed Sonya's hand in hers. The woman seemed confused, but continued to speak about how much she hoped this conversation would help patch their misunderstanding—as she now termed it. Sonya was even more confused when Caitlin grabbed the slighter woman around the waist, her fuller bosom against Sonya's much smaller one. And she was distinctly alarmed when Caitlin's lips pressed against hers and her guest forced her tongue onto the teeth whose whiteness and perfect symmetry had so mesmerised her.

There was a moment, not too long but certainly not to be forgotten, when Sonya abandoned herself to the affects of the wine and her own confusion. This was brief but long enough for two mouths to tangle savagely, teeth clashing on teeth, tongue on tongue, and mascara and eyeliner to smudge. This was the small opportunity that became the only moment of pleasure, however sourly it might be later recalled, in the many months of separation, suspicion, pleading and resentment that would soon accompany the breakdown of Caitlin's marriage to Ken.

The two women disengaged the one from the other, panting and red with both unresolved passion and embarrassment.

“I don’t know what happened to me...” said Sonya, who had already forgotten that it wasn’t she who had initiated this moment of passion. “It must be my anxieties... It’s just...”

Caitlin pressed her hand on Sonya's shoulder.

"It's all right," she said. "I understand."

And with that Caitlin left, turning her head back just the once to see her husband's ex for one last time. Ever.

As she now knew so well, Sonya may once have been her husband's past, but she was now destined to also be her husband's future.