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Fly in the Ointment

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Extract

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I GET IT ALL THE TIME NOW, FROM EVERYONE, EVEN THE Governor.

'Exemplary behaviour, Lois. No one can fault you on that. And Mrs McKay doesn't like to think what she will do without you when it comes to the accounts.'

She taps the pile of reports and looks at me over her half-moon specs as I wait for the 'only one fly' bit.

'Only one fly in the ointment, and that's the fact that you still won't face up to your guilt.'

Guilt, though – that's in the eye of the beholder. And it isn't as if I'm still pretending that I wasn't there and didn't do a thing. I kept that line up through the trial, of course. But that was only because I thought there was a chance I'd get away with it. (So did my lawyer – reasonable doubt and all

that.) But afterwards I never kept pretending. I'd simply explain the circumstances and say to people, 'Well, tell me what you think you'd have done. *You* be the judge.'

In any case, guilt isn't minted fresh. Each story's triggered by some sort of accident and littered with others all along the way. A chance meeting here. A run of bad luck there. 'Go back and write it down,' says Mrs Kuperschmidt, whenever she visits. 'That's bound to make you think more deeply about the choices you made. You'll come to see you could have done things differently. Then, when you next come up before the board, you will be able to convince them that you've made headway. They can take a chance on letting you back in the community.'

'Community' indeed! I'm trying not to curl my lip, but if the famous so-called community that we're supposed to have around us had offered even a spot of help along the way at times I needed it, I wouldn't have ended up here. I don't say that to Mrs Kuperschmidt, of course. I simply nod and ask her for more notepads and pencils. I will set it down. Though how far back I have to start is quite a mystery. The only certainty is that it couldn't possibly have happened if Larry hadn't been born. And that leads back to my son Malachy. And that leads back to Stuart, and I can't think what made me want to marry

him. It caused enough trouble. Even the night before my wedding, Dad was still giving it me with both barrels. 'When I think back on all our hopes for you. You realize there's still time to change your mind.'

'But I don't *want* to change it.'

'Lois, you make your bed and you will have to lie in it. Don't think you can come crying back here when you see the mistake you've made.'

'Don't think for a moment I will!'

The tin-pot dictator never hidden deep inside him must have taken my sticking up for myself as a massive affront, because he didn't show up for the wedding. Simply didn't show up! I don't have brothers or sisters. (My parents' other two babies had been stillborn.) And my only really good friend had just gone off to work in South Carolina. So on my side it was about the sparsest gathering of people you can imagine. No chance of failing to notice that my own father wasn't there.

In the foyer, I caught my mother's arm. 'It's almost *time*. Where *is* he?'

She cringed. (She was good at that.) 'I'm not really sure, dear.'

I was ready to shake her. 'Mum! This is my *wedding*. Where *is* he? He can't still be parking the car. What's going *on*?'

She fiddled with the cuffs of her new suit. 'I'm

sorry, dear. He just said something about not wanting to watch you toss your life away on—'

She stopped.

In gathering disgust, I let go of her sleeve. 'On—?'

'Well, I suppose, on Stuart really, dear.'

'Oh,' I said, still smarting from the previous night. 'You mean "that pipsqueak trainee insurance salesman from down the street"?'

My mother cleared her face of all expression.

I changed tack. 'So what did *you* say?'

She turned resentful, as if she felt that she of all people was blameless.

'Mu-um!' I wailed (as quietly as I could, for fear of being overheard by the two colleagues Stuart had invited at the last minute to swell the numbers). 'You must have said *something*. Surely you told Dad he had no right to spoil my wedding day. Surely you told him—'

My mother never cared for criticism. 'Well, Lois, if you feel I've let you down so badly, perhaps you'd rather that I wasn't here either.'

I stood there, speechless. Just then a woman appeared in the Registry Office doorway. 'The marriage of Lois Cartright and Stuart Henderson. Please step inside now.'

Blind to the unfolding drama, Stuart left his widowed mother and came over to join me. I didn't

know what to do so I took his arm. We walked into the big airy office awash with flowers, and took our places in front of the massive desk. The others trooped in behind us. I can't recall a thing that happened or a word that was said. Only one thought was hammering in my brain through the whole ceremony: had my mother come in behind us? I wasn't going to humiliate myself by turning to look, and yet I couldn't think of anything else. If paying attention at your wedding is any part of the deal at all, we can't have been married properly. But still the Registrar declared us man and wife, and even as Stuart took up her suggestion and kissed me, I was peeking over his shoulder, looking for Mum.

She wasn't there. I was so *hurt*. You can imagine. I felt my parents had behaved appallingly. I'm not sure how I got through the next couple of hours, and when at last there was some time to think about it afterwards, my anger boiled over. They had gone too far – both of them. If they thought they could make up for this in a hurry, then they were wrong. I didn't care how long it was before we spoke again. That was their problem, not mine. I certainly wasn't going to make any effort to get in contact.

The days turned into weeks. I stayed firm, even though there were a couple of occasions when, but

for the rift between us, I might have rushed home sobbing. Stuart turned out to be a whole lot less loving than I'd hoped. I had mistaken his lack of inner fire for manly gentleness. And, like most women, I'd all too charitably taken his unwillingness ever to interrupt me or take a different line on anything for companionable agreement whereas in fact, of course, more often than not his lack of response stemmed from simple indifference.

The vague unease that maybe Dad had shown a whole lot better judgement than I'd thought was probably another reason why I never went back to patch up the quarrel between us. But after a while things took their own course. Stuart's own mother – his only real relation in the world – died of a heart attack. My parents were perfectly well aware how close the two of them had been, and still they sent no card. (I knew they knew.) So in revenge I didn't get in touch when, only a few weeks after my mother-in-law's lonely little funeral, I became pregnant. Or when I lost that baby. Or when, a year or so later, I finally found myself pregnant again.

It was exactly five months after that, at one of my clinic check-ups, that someone I half remembered from school tapped at a page of the paper she'd taken off the waiting-room table, and passed it across to me.

I glanced down amiably enough. 'What am I supposed to be looking at?'

She pointed.

It was one of those black-edged squares on the back page. A death announcement. One of our teachers? Maybe even someone our own age?

I had to read it twice before I grasped it. 'Isobel Mary Cartright? But that's my *mother*.'

I must have gone bone white. She gave me a curious glance. 'Didn't you know?'

I shook my head, and barely whispered, 'No.'

She thought I meant about the announcement. 'Oh, well,' she said. 'Maybe one of your mother's friends offered to phone it in, and your dad forgot to mention it.'

'No, no!' I couldn't help wailing. 'You don't understand. I didn't *know*.'

If she'd been startled before, now she was staring. 'How could you not know about your own mother's *death*?'

I felt my cheeks burn as I studied the words for the third time. '*Beloved wife of Ronald*.' Nothing about me. I can remember thinking I ought to explain. Then suddenly everything round me was bleached of colour – shimmeringly bright – and things went blurry. Perhaps I nearly fainted. Certainly without any talk about who was next in line, somebody

ushered me through a door and on to a chair in one of the cubicles. And there I sat until a doctor came and fussed about whether she could get a proper blood-pressure reading or whether I'd have to come back. I'm sure she hadn't grasped I'd only just that minute learned of my mother's death. The paper I was clutching was almost a week old. I think she probably assumed that catching sight of that announcement of a funeral I must have so recently attended had sent me into some fresh surge of grief.

I drove home in a daze of shock and misery. All afternoon my mind was racing, but I couldn't manage one clear thought. I kept trying to ring Stuart, but he wasn't answering and the firm's switchboard kept up the usual barrage of defence: 'I don't think he's back from lunch yet.' 'I'm afraid he hasn't picked up his messages.' 'I think he might be out of the office this afternoon.'

So I just waited. When he finally walked through the door I more or less *ordered* him to pick up the phone and ring my father. He gave one of his martyred sighs and, just as he always did whenever I asked him to phone some tradesman to complain about sloppy work or an outrageous bill, he said he couldn't do it if I was standing there listening to every word. So, knowing even at the start that he would make as shoddy a job of the call as he always

does when plumbers or electricians are concerned, I went out in the garden and watched through the window until he put down the phone.

I hurried back. 'Well? What did he say?'

The very speed of my return made Stuart prickly. 'Not very much.'

I was in no mood to take things gently. 'What do you mean, "Not very much"?'

'Just that. Not much.'

'But did he *explain*?'

'Explain?'

I lost patience. 'For God's sake, Stuart! Did he explain why I had to read about my own mother's death and funeral by chance in the *paper*?'

I could tell from his scowl that Stuart was really resentful about being stuck in the middle of all this unpleasantness.

'*Well?*' I persisted.

And, would you believe it, my own husband pitched in against me! Choosing the tone of voice you'd use on a petulant child, he told me, 'Well, Lois, he did say he couldn't see what else you could reasonably have expected.'

I could barely believe what I was hearing. 'Sorry?'

'Well, you know. Given that you had quarrelled with the two of them, and never rang . . .'

'I quarrelled with *them*? *I* never rang? I like that!

Surely you had the guts to remind Dad that it was *them* who ruined our wedding – him by not showing up and her by getting in a snit and taking off. Surely you at least mentioned that!'

Now he'd turned sullen. 'Lois, if you're so sure you're in the right about all this, maybe you should have made the call yourself.'

'*If* I'm so sure? Aren't *you*? After all, it was your wedding day as well as mine.'

He shrugged. 'All water under the bridge now, though, isn't it? So what's the point of going on about it?'

I do believe that was the closest I ever came to hitting Stuart. I do remember thinking, 'One battle at a time,' and as good as dismissing him. I slid my hand over my churning baby. What if I lost this one too, and purely out of temper? I forced myself to wait till I was firmly back under control. Then I picked up the phone and rang my father's number, as I knew he had known I would.

I stuck right in. Without a word of greeting, I challenged him. 'In the paper it said Mum died "after a brave fight". Does that mean she had cancer?'

'Oh, hello Lois.' He sounded almost smug. 'Yes. That's right. It started in her stomach a year ago last Christmas, and ended up all over.'

I tried to stick to a tone of icy control. 'And why wasn't I told?'

His answer astonished me. 'Well, Lois, that's the way your mother wanted it.'

'She *told* you not to tell me?'

'That's right.'

I must have sounded like a howling eight-year-old. 'But *why*?'

I'll swear the smug tinge to his tone deepened to one of pleasure. Clearly this was the moment the two of them had been waiting for through all those hospital appointments and blood tests, recurrences and relapses, and the last slide downhill. I'm sure that, after Mum's death, my father even thought it was a real pity his sick wife couldn't have defied the natural order of things sufficiently to relish the moment properly along with him.

'What your mother actually said, Lois, was that she didn't think that you'd be interested.'

'*What?*'

'Be fair. You hadn't bothered with us from the day you married. No calls. No visits. You couldn't have made it clearer that, now you'd got Stuart, the two of us were just a couple of cast-offs. And so your mother—'

I'm sure he might have carried on for hours, spinning the story his way. But I'd put down the phone.

Stuart was back in the room and looking at me. 'See, Lois? I *told* you that there was no point.'

And, try as I might, I could not fail to recognize the exact same hatefully smug tone of voice I'd just been hearing from my father.