



Partnership *Agreements*

Fiction by Mary Hutchings Reed

At the funeral, his buddies didn't talk about his winning Illinois Physics Teacher of the Year three times in 25 years; no, rather than talk about how Michael Bradley had touched the lives of hundreds of students or marched alongside them in homecoming parades and protests for social justice, they talked about the time he opened a bridge hand 6NT and made seven, all the tricks. Harry, his longtime bridge partner, told the mourners, "He had great intuition."

Behind Michael's widow, Jackie, someone muttered "Lucky bast---."

"He knew the game," Harry said. "He knew all the probabilities and was a stickler for what he called 'the rules,' as if they were the laws of physics. He tolerated my intuitions only when they were right. I imagine Jackie knows this better than anyone."

It had been the only sore spot in their 43 years of marriage. She'd loved him, of course – they'd married in their late 20s, and they'd made a great team: raised two solid sons, restored a grand old Victorian on the northwest side of the city, even sailed long-distance races on the Great Lakes. But they couldn't play competitive bridge as a pair.

His bridge buddies were right about Michael's devotion to his "rules." "Obey" hadn't been one of her "love, honor and ..." wedding vows; the only reason they could sail together was because he'd acknowledged, early on, that boats were her domain. The first time she'd taken him out sailing on a small boat on a Wisconsin lake, they

were hardly off the buoy, sail up and fluttering, when she noticed the wind change and yelled, "Duck."

"Why?" he'd asked, just before the boom knocked him overboard.

Some things were obvious. Bridge was not. It was all artificial systems, different strategies, choices to be made and chances to be taken. She loved the game, the complexities and the possibilities, the infinite learning curve. She and Michael played together socially with cocktails and nibbles and were by far the best pair among their friends on any given night. Mistakes were easily forgiven. But when they became empty nesters, they decided to play competitive bridge and joined a duplicate bridge club, with several hundred members, from beginners to acknowledged world-class players. After their first competitive round, in a limited game for beginning and intermediate players, they were shocked to finish in the middle of a field of 20 novice pairs.

"That was cutthroat," she'd said to Michael as they'd dragged themselves home.

"That's why they call it 'competitive,'" he said, unfazed.

"A lot of egomaniacs," she said. "They act like it's a test of how smart you are."

"That's you, not them." He shrugged. "It's a game that favors experience," he'd said. "Plus, they know the rules of their bidding system and they obey them." She hadn't liked his implication.

They'd agreed they would study and practice, and as their confidence returned, they graduated to an open

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game, with expert players. That's when it started: the second-guessing, finger-pointing, righteous blame-shifting. They stopped playing together. Michael found Harry, and she played instead with new women friends. She still enjoyed the game but was sorry that she and Michael didn't play together.

It hadn't occurred to her until she heard the beginning of Harry's eulogy that perhaps Michael's other partners didn't argue with him. Or argued but didn't take it personally. Or when Michael told them something, they shook it off, didn't take it as gospel, just as Michael being Michael – the smart, rule-abiding physicist, confident and certain. They'd let Michael state the rules, as if they were in fact the immutable laws of physics. Ironic now that they would be talking about his intuition.

As Harry's voice cracked on another bridge story, Jackie remembered the first time they'd played at the club. They'd sat at a table with a man in a wool shirt, with the nametag Bob, who looked to be in his late 60s, and a woman, Margaret, whom she assumed was his wife. They both wore wedding rings: the man a simple gold band and the woman three intertwined strands of white gold, gold and silver. "It's so nice you can play with your husband," Jackie said.

"Oh, no," Margaret said. "We wouldn't have lasted a month if we had to play bridge together. He plays with a friend, over there." She pointed to a man three tables away.

"We've agreed to just have fun and not let bridge come between us," Michael said. "My wife's the brains of this operation," he added. She'd thought it sweet at the time, but it occurred to her later that he was giving her the responsibility for how poorly they might do.

"It's a game about partnership agreements and understandings, that's for sure," Bob said. "It helps that you no doubt know every nuance of her facial expression."

"Although you can't use that information," Margaret said, more sternly than called for. "Besides, that's another reason not to play together: You read him, you don't read him. You should've known. You've never understood me. It's a nightmare!"

"They'll understand soon enough," Bob said, nodding toward the corner table.

Jackie glanced in that direction. The couple there looked ancient. "Ellsworth and Victoria Hart," Bob announced. "In their 90s. Play every day. I doubt they've agreed on a single bid ever. And they're both top players."

"She's a saint," Margaret said. "What she puts up with. And, for my money, she's the better player." Bob shrugged.

The round started, and Jackie and Michael were both surprised by how frequently partners at other tables made critical comments to each other. Why didn't you return my lead? Didn't you see my signal? You should always ... Occasionally, an opponent would also give Jackie a "helpful hint" on how she could have made one more trick, and

she felt her cheeks flush with embarrassment. There were new opponents after every three hands, like speed dating. New mistakes. New embarrassments. Torture.

Midway through that afternoon, after they'd finished playing a hand, Michael said, "You disobeyed the rule on leads. I've told you before ..." She was a lawyer and an administrative law judge. She was used to being the one doing the "telling." On the bench, she tempered her application of the law with compassion and her optimistic intuition about people. Michael was no more of an authority than she was! She glared at him. Finally, their last round of the afternoon was at the corner table with the Harts. She remembered looking at Michael then and wondering what it would be like to play with him when they were in their 90s.

Now, a sob stuck in her throat. Filled with remorse for lost time together, Jackie barely heard the final words of Harry's eulogy. She remembered that when they'd sat down at the Hart's table that day, Ellsworth Hart said, with intolerable authority, "I'm not arguing with you, Victoria. I'm telling you, you're wrong."

She regretted now not having been Michael's bridge partner, not having had Victoria's humility or patience or whatever it was that had allowed the old woman to smile like the saint Margaret had said she was.

But, Jackie thought fondly, she hadn't had to obey or dismiss sour memories or turn his churlishness into "intuition." That hadn't been their partnership agreement. 🙄



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