

## GETTING READY FOR THE END

### Characters

Abigail – oldest daughter

Joan – second daughter

Meredith – third daughter

Martha – mother

Frank – dad

Dr. Wong – geriatrician

Narrator

Narrator: Family is sitting around in a cramped exam room.

Abigail: Where's Dr. Wong?

Martha: (placating) Just be patient, Abigail. Dr. Wong is so busy. All her patients just love her. They don't mind waiting for her. *I* love her, and I don't mind waiting.

Abigail: Well, I'm not her patient. And I mind.

Joan: I've got to pick up Sarah at 3:00.

Meredith: Doesn't she have her driver's license yet?

Joan: (embarrassed) Her dad took away her car privileges after that last party.

Abigail: That girl is out of control!

Frank: All's well that ends well.

Martha: Just be patient, girls.

Meredith: Ma, why is dad here anyway? It's so hard to get him out of that nursing home. I'm afraid every time I take him down that ramp the wheelchair will tip over and he'll spill out. It'll be like Humpty Dumpty... All the king's horses and all the king's men...

Joan: That's so disrespectful, Mer!

Martha: Don't talk about your father as if he weren't here.

Meredith: Well, of course he's here. That's what I'm asking – *why* is he here?

Martha: (huffily) Your father and I have been married 56 years. He's been by my side for every important decision in my life. And I want him here for this one!

Joan: I don't understand why any of us is here. Mama, you're in perfect health. You're not about to die anytime soon. It just seems so morbid to talk about death. It feels like bad luck.

Martha: Joan, I keep trying to explain to you, my health is far from perfect. I have diabetes, I have high blood pressure, I have heart disease, and you know I'm a bit chubbier than I'd like. I could keel over at any moment, and I want to be prepared!

Joan: Mama, don't talk like that!

Abigail: *I* think it makes a lot of sense. Let's get things settled. Where's that doctor?

Narrator: As if on cue, Dr. Wong rushes in, waving a POLST form in her hand.

Dr. Wong: So sorry to keep you waiting...

Frank: A stitch in time saves nine.

Dr. Wong: Oh hi Frank! Good advice, I'm stitching as fast as I can. (laughs nervously)  
Haha! I am really behind today, so many patients, everyone seems to have been waiting...

Abigail: (sarcastically) Don't worry, they all love you.

Dr. Wong: What?

Abigail: Nothing. Can we get started?

Dr. Wong: (Looking around) Of course. Martha, I didn't realize you had three daughters. I thought there were only two.

Meredith: Well, I *was* the afterthought!

Narrator: Everyone laughs a bit uncomfortably.

Dr. Wong: And I see Frank is here. Why did you bring Frank?

Meredith: That's what I wanted to know.

Abigail: (before Martha can answer) He's always been at mom's side for all her important decisions, so she made Meredith haul him over for this one as well.

Dr. Wong: Oh, all right, that's very understandable. Now, Martha, as I explained to you, I normally have these end-of-life conversations only with my patient, not the entire family. You're the one who needs to make these decisions.

Joan: (getting up) I don't think I can do this. I think I'm going to start crying.

Abigail: Sit down, Joan.

Meredith: If anyone's going to cry, it should be Ma. It's the end of *her* life we're talking about, not yours!

Martha: I understand, Dr. Wong, and you are very nice to make the time, especially when you are so busy... But I wanted you here in case the girls don't understand some of the medical issues. I want them to be completely clear on what I want.

Frank: On a clear day, you can see forever.

Dr. Wong: Very good, let's get started.

Martha: (somewhat nervously) So girls, I want you to know that in case I become incapacitated...

Joan: (upset) Mom, what are you talking about? You've got all your marbles and then some.

Martha: Explain, Dr. Wong.

Dr. Wong: Incapacitation is a technical term. It refers to the possibility that at some point – we hope far in the future – your mom might lose her capacity to make decisions for herself. We try to determine whether she is capable of understanding the pros and cons of different medical courses of action; whether she can discriminate the benefits and risks, or indications and consequences of particular treatments or procedures; and/or whether she may be unduly influenced by another person in her decision-making process.

Meredith: (joking) Abigail, I know you've got your eye on Ma's will.

Joan: Oh, that's a terrible thought!

Abigail: She's joking, Joan.

Joan: Well, it's not funny.

Dr. Wong: It does happen. (then quickly, realizing she may have insulted them) Not in your family of course.

Martha: (determined) As I was saying, if I become incapacitated, I've decided that Abigail should be the one on the form in charge of all medical decisions.

Narrator: There is a pause, as the girls look at each other.

Meredith: Why her?

Abigail: (simultaneously) Why me?

Martha: (a little uncomfortable) Well, dear, I thought you would be strong enough to pull the plug on me. I didn't think Joanie or Mer would go through with it.

Abigail: Well, thanks... I guess.

Joan: I would *never* pull the plug on you, mama.

Martha: (quickly) But I want *all* of you to know what my wishes are, when the time comes, so you don't quarrel.

Frank: What you want isn't always what you get.

Joan: Mama, that time won't be for a long time.

Martha: Of course not dear, but....

Frank: Better safe than sorry.

Narrator: Everyone looks at Frank with some surprise.

Martha: (patting his arm) Well, yes, dear, that's exactly what *I* was going to say.

Dr. Wong: So moving right along, Martha...

Martha: (briskly) Quite right. Dears, the first thing I want you to understand is that I don't want any heroic measures if I'm on my way out.

Joan: But Mama, naturally everything in us will be calling out to save you!

Dr. Wong: Joan, I can see how much you love your mom. It might help you, and all of us, to understand that we are not talking about decisions about *whether* or *when* your mom will die. They're only decisions about *how* your mom will die when *nothing* we can do will save her in any meaningful sense.

Abigail: (taking her DPAHC role to heart) What do you mean by heroic measures, Ma?

Martha: (a little helplessly) Well, like CPR for example.

Joan: CPR can bring people back from the brink of death. I've seen it!

Meredith: (skeptically) Where?

Joan: (a little embarrassed) Well, on tv.

Meredith: (appeals to Dr. Wong) It doesn't work as well in real life, does it?

Dr. Wong: That's a good point, Meredith. The statistics on surviving CPR in the hospital are quite discouraging. CPR has a low success rate. And it can be a brutal procedure. The patient often ends up bruised, with broken ribs, and still dies.

Martha: (triumphantly) You see? I don't want that. Not if I'm going to die anyway.

Abigail: (the DPAHC responsibility is weighing heavily) But how will we know if you're going to die? Is it always that clear?

Martha: Dr. Wong, explain.

Dr. Wong: Abigail is right. Sometimes it isn't clear. But, for example, when the patient is in multi-organ failure, even if we can fix one thing – get the heart going again, reverse the kidney shut-down – the end is near, and we aren't doing the patient any favors by subjecting them to one more invasive procedure.

Abigail: Well what about other stuff, Ma? There are so many technologies these days. Medicine seems like it can keep you alive almost indefinitely.

Dr. Wong: Martha, let's talk about a few other options. For example, ventilated-assisted breathing. What do you feel about that?

Joan: If it was the only way Mama could breathe, we couldn't let her suffocate!

Dr. Wong: Joan, let's hear what your mom has to say about it.

Martha: Hmmm. I wouldn't want to be on a ventilator indefinitely, I mean for whatever was left of my life. But if the doctors thought I could come off it, and it was only temporary, I suppose that would be all right.

Narrator: Dr. Wong unobtrusively checks a box on the POLST form in her lap.

Abigail: Suppose we started Ma on a ventilator with the expectation she would get off it, but then she got worse, and the doctors decided she'd need it permanently.

Martha: (decidedly) Then I'd want you to remove it and let me go. That's no way to live!

Joan: (horrified) Oh mama, we couldn't take it out once it was in there, if it was helping you breathe. It would feel like murder!

Meredith: Don't be so melodramatic, Joan.

Dr. Wong: You know, I understand how it might feel terrible, Joan. But if there was no hope of your mom recovering, it might be the kindest thing you could do. Especially since it's what your mom wants.

Abigail: (looking at her mom) Ma, I think I understand.

Dr. Wong: Another topic related to the ventilator is artificial tube feeding and hydration.

Joan: Wait a second. Aren't you talking about food and water?

Dr. Wong: (calmly) No, not really, at least not in the sense that any normal person thinks about food and water. When a patient has become very ill and there is no likelihood of recovery, a feeding tube and artificial hydration can needlessly prolong the patient's suffering. Withdrawing artificial feeding can lead to a less protracted death.

Joan: (firmly) No, no, no. I will never agree to starving Mama!

Meredith: It's not up to you.

Martha: Girls, don't quarrel. (to Dr. Wong) Just like when they were little. But I'm not so sure about this one. I've heard starving is a horrible way to die.

Dr. Wong: Actually, while that is true in general, removing a gastrostomy tube in the controlled setting of the hospital can be well-managed so as not to cause additional suffering to the patient.

Narrator: Dr. Wong's pager goes off.

Frank: All good things must come to an end.

Dr. Wong: Oh dear. I apologize, Martha, Meredith, Abigail, Joan – uh, and Frank - but I have an emergency. I'm going to have to cut our session short. We can get together next week to discuss antibiotic use, rehospitalizations, comfort care, hospice...

Martha: Look, girls, Dr. Wong, here's my bottom-line. If there's a reasonable chance I can recover, or even have a few months of meaningful life – not too much pain, not too much medication, not in the hospital on a machine – then I'd want whatever help medicine can give me. Otherwise, I don't want to be in pain, I want anything that will

make me feel more comfortable, I don't want to be running back and forth to the hospital, and I'd prefer to die at home.

Dr. Wong: That's very helpful, Martha. We can continue this discussion at our next visit.

Abigail: Mom, we get it.

Meredith: Yeah, we get it, Mom.

Joan: I'm not sure...

Abigail and Meredith: (together) Joan, you get it.

Frank: Better late than never!