

# A Few Words in Closing

By Charlotte Johnstone



This was it, they realized. Marian Lloyd—age 82, widow for 12 years, mother of three, Forbearance choir member and retired bookkeeper—was dying from pneumonia after a series of small strokes. They were silent as they watched the thready pulse, shallow breathing and falling numbers on the machine by her hospital bed.

Fred, her oldest, held her hand. Allison, her middle child, stroked her hair. And Jim, her youngest, stood by the foot of the bed, watching and waiting. Fred's wife, Gwen, stood with her hand on her husband's back. Allison's husband and their two children watched by the door, while Jim's wife, Bethany, stared out the window. Rev. Hustisford, Forbearance's pastor, arrived, led them in a brief prayer and then, quietly and almost imperceptibly, Marian's life came to its end.

Arrangements were made and the service was held at Forbearance, but unfortunately, as it turned out, the family unity of Marian's last hours began to unravel as the complications of sibling relationships surfaced in the ensuing days.

Marian had often wondered how three people born to the same parents could be so different from each other. Fred was a goal-setter, competitive and frequently disparaging of those

who couldn't keep up with him. Allison, a softer personality, though no less ambitious, had remained closest to their mother and shared Marian's distaste for needless confrontation. Jim had drifted from one thing to another with, in the opinion of his brother and sister, an unsettling nonchalance—at least he did until he married and his wife started calling the shots.

They had shared a mother, the unifying person in their disparate lives, but now the familial bonds began to fray. As they gathered at Marian's house to begin sorting through her things, old patterns began to emerge once again, just as their mother, it turned out, had anticipated.

Fred, whose home was far away, questioned why Allison, the daughter who lived in her mother's town and who had moved Marian to her own home after the first stroke, had "allowed" the pneumonia to develop so rapidly. "Were you paying enough attention?" he asked, adding gratuitously, "You were always the flaky one, you know, even more than Jim. I should have been the one making the decisions."

"Well, where were you, Fred?" Allison shot back. "Did you check with her doctors? Did you call more than once a month?"

Did you ever ask if I was stressed out? Did you ever come to sit with her at night like I did? Let's face it, Fred, you were always like that—didn't like the dirty work and left it to others to pick up the pieces. While you were leading your life elsewhere, I was managing mother, my job and my family—doing the best I could with precious little help from you or from Jim, I might add.”

Jim and Fred objected, but any attempt at self-defense was cut off as Fred's wife, Gwen, who once did some postgraduate work in psychology and never let anyone forget it, delivered a short lecture on the stages of grief, exhorting them to “get in touch with your feelings,” and managing to annoy everyone within earshot.

And Jim didn't help matters when he announced that he and his wife—well, if truth be told, mostly his wife—had taken it upon themselves to decide how Marian's “effects” would be distributed. Jim and Bethany's home was several states away and, while they hadn't visited very often, they professed to know just who should get what. And it quickly became apparent that Bethany was quite intent on acquiring as much of what she called “the good stuff” as she could get her hands on. It was, in short, an attempted coup that scattered them all throughout the house in pursuit of unclaimed treasures.

Out to Jim and Bethany's car went Marian's silver tea set. An antique end table was spirited to Fred's van. Allison nabbed the jewelry. Gwen stuffed the silver flatware into a tote bag. China disappeared in one direction, while two crystal lamps went in another. Downstairs, an argument erupted over their mother's favorite rocker, while upstairs, competing claims were made for a maple bedroom suite. And, through it all, the middle-aged children of Marian Lloyd, presumably of sound mind, revisited their childhood alliances and rivalries, their inherent strengths and weaknesses, with the unsettling license of those newly unconstrained by a parental presence.

Then, in walked Rev. Hustisford. “I think you need to see this,” he said to them all. “Your mother came to see me just before her 80th birthday.

She wanted to preplan her funeral, but she also gave me this rather long list detailing how she wanted her household goods distributed, instructing me to give it to you after the service.

It seems she anticipated that you might find the process a bit, um, difficult—something about how you hadn't agreed on much since you were kids?—and she wanted her intentions to be clear. It's a bookkeeper's list—everything neatly accounted for and, from the looks of things here, I suspect it will be, uh, shall we say, clarifying? So . . . I'll just go now and leave you to it.”

Above a comprehensive list of items with names attached, was a handwritten note.

“To My Children: As you begin dismantling your childhood home, I want you to remember your childhood lessons. Share your toys. Play fairly with others. Do not take what is not rightfully yours. Find kind words to say. Think of others first. Do what is right, not what is easy. Cultivate your better natures. Practice good manners. You are my family, so I expect you to behave yourselves!”

Well, what ensued was a contrite scene as the subdued siblings rediscovered their maturity and followed their mother's instructions. The tea service and end table were retrieved from car and van. The jewelry was divided, piece-by-piece. Flatware, china, lamps and furniture were allotted as directed, while a number of prized items were set aside, much to Bethany's dismay, for Marian's closest friends. All the rest of it was tagged for Forbearance's resale shop.

Allison was relieved and silently thanked her mother. Fred found himself newly impressed with Marian's organizational skills. And Jim, who hadn't cared very much about who got what in the first place, finally got fed up with Bethany's whining and made her go sit in the car until they had it all sorted out.

Marian's children, when they closed her door for the final time to go their separate ways, took with them pieces of their mother's life, but more importantly, they took with them the rueful knowledge that their mother may have known them better than they knew themselves. And somewhere, perhaps, Marian Lloyd permitted herself a hint of a smile.

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