Sally and Jake have been married for 30 years. They have two children, Alice and Peter, both now grown. When they first met in college, Sally was suffering from the flu. Jake helped nurse her back to health and then made himself into her “Medical Inspector,” checking to see was eating well, getting enough sleep and such. It of course also led to sex.

As they grew older, the pattern of their first encounter played out in other scenarios. If something had to be lifted or moved, Jake would move it for her. If something needed to be carried, often after they were first married, the children, Jake would carry them. Both played their parts in this pattern. Sometimes, Sally would carry the kids, but not for long. Sometimes Jake would get sick and Sally would nurse him, with a little laugh at the reversal of their roles, but not often.

Their children were always mystified by the pattern. “She’s perfectly healthy,” they’d say, first to each other and then later their parents. “Why are you always acting like mom’s on her last legs?” they’d ask their father. “And why don’t you ever do anything for yourself?” they’d question their mom. Jake and Sally would just sigh and smile. The children didn’t understand.

Recently, the family had tragic news. Jake has been diagnosed with terminal cancer, and has only a few months to live. “I’m tough,” Jake has said. “Don’t worry about me.” But Sally has been beside herself. “What will I do?” she asks over and over. “What will I do?”