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She walked through the house touching things—the dusty sideboard, the lid of the piano, the smooth mahogany of the newel post—and up the stairs, fingers gliding along the banister. On the chest of drawers in her bedroom stood a cut-glass vase of dead white roses, the water evaporated, the fallen petals crinkled on the linen dresser scarf. She pinched up a few and flicked them from her fingers. They landed on the patchwork quilt folded at the foot of her bed. Then she sang, at half voice, without even thinking and with no one to hear:

*Avec ces fleurs, que l'eau traîne en courant—
Avec ces fleurs, qui vont aux précipices. . .*

She stopped there and heard the soft silence. There was sun in the smudged windowpane. When she took a seat on the bed, the warmth struck her neck, then her cheek, then her ear.

“What on earth were you singing about?”

It was her brother, who had noiselessly followed her up the stairs with the luggage. She was imagining him still out in the garden where he had stayed to tie back a rosebush before it could prick her a second time. She had not meant him to hear. He never truly appreciated her singing. It had taken her away to Europe, to people with no idea she was his big sister from sleepy little Josephine, Illinois.

“Thank you, Leo,” she said when he set her lighter suitcase on the bed and the heavier one on the creaking floorboards. “I was singing about scattering flowers into a stream. It’s a spell to break an enchantment.”

“And it has to be in French?”

She ignored his sarcasm and said, "I sent you the notices," then added somberly, "It may be the last role I ever sing."

She had been saying this sort of thing for several years now. Her brother never took her seriously. He probably saw his big sister forever singing at one unpronounceable European opera house or another. But for now, she could be a comfort to Leo when he visited the parents. On the drive back from the Moline airport, they had stopped at this Riverbend place to see Dad. Tired as Iva was, she could not have waited till tomorrow to see him. She found herself rattling off all her news as if to keep Dad from saying how weak he felt, how numb, how dull. Iva had sensed all the nerves beneath her pale skin, and at the old house they were still tingling. It was nearly a year since she had been here, and now Dad, like Mom, had moved out for good. Iva was glad she had planned a longer visit this time. She would settle in with her brother. She would turn the thermostat higher than he did, and they would sit by the cozy fire after supper. She would cook him tasty French dishes and open bottles of good wine.

"But, Leo, I don't feel ready to quit," she said. "It's just my voice telling me to be a bit more careful."

"You could stay in the parents' old room, Iva, if you prefer."

She felt the warm sun falling across her cheek from the southern window. "No, I'll sleep here in my own," she said.

"I'm using their bed to sort family photos, but I could gather them up."

"No, this is fine," Iva said, patting the pillow.

"Were you a success?"

"In Strasbourg? I was quite warmly received." She gave Leo a satisfied smile, perhaps because he had finally asked. "It was the perfect part for me at my age," she said, "nothing till Act Two, then some sublime solos and a big duet with a young Estonian soprano. She told me she was in awe of my long career. And then, a death scene in the arms of an athletic Belgian. Oh, they were all so young!"

"You say you have to be more careful?" Leo had moved to the window and was fussing with the fringe of the white cotton curtains.

"I'll stop next year when I turn sixty," Iva said. "You're blocking my sun, Leo. Come sit down."

"This really is your house now," he said. "You can run it however you like. If I didn't have a tenant in my Oak Street place, I'd move back there, so when your boys get here —"

"We'll be fine." Iva tugged at his shirt sleeve so he would sit beside her. "There's plenty of beds. When my boys come, there's the attic."

"My tenant, he was one of my clients," said Leo. "Former clients, I mean. They're all former now. I'll never have clients again. That's the end of that."

"Oh, Leo," said Iva leaning her shoulder into his and giving his rough hand a squeeze. "It's a chance maybe to begin something new."

He wrinkled up his nose and squinted his heavy eyelids.

“And Dad was just saying this afternoon how he likes thinking of you and me together in this old house again,” Iva said. “He wants us here in his stead.”

“In August,” said Leo, “that’s the last time I drove him by. He whispered something I could barely catch. ‘I thought I’d have a bit longer here,’ he said. He’s never asked to be driven by again. Unlike Mom, who chatters about coming home but wouldn’t know it if she did. Iva, she won’t know you.”

“I’ll face that tomorrow,” Iva said. “One parent at a time.”

Leo stood up. “I’ll leave you to unpack. I think, when Mom talks of coming home, she means to Granny’s farm. She babbles on about the chicken coops.”

After Leo left her, Iva did not feel like getting up. She lay back against the patchwork quilt where the petals were scattered and heard music without moving her lips.

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Iva had managed to compose a meal from a box of linguine, a jar of tomato sauce with mushrooms, and tins of dried herbs and spices from the days of their mother’s good health. She could not do much with Leo’s stock of sliced bread, iceberg lettuce, and grated cheese, but she promised they would eat better tomorrow night.

She insisted on sitting in the dining room with candles on the table and sideboard, and she made him shut off the fluorescent fixture shining in from the kitchen. She had brought with her a bottle of wine for the occasion. “A favorite burgundy of mine, straight from France,” she said and poured him a glass.

Leo was beginning to take her in. Between the rush at the airport and the catching up with Dad, Iva herself had not yet sunk into Leo’s thoughts. And then at home had come the unpacking and showering and preparing dinner while discussing the parents. She kept faulting herself for not flying over earlier when Mom got worse, when Dad was diagnosed, and she kept thanking Leo for all he had done to set Dad up in Riverbend House and still keep such faithful watch over Mom. Yes, their little sister had also done her bit, but Iva insisted it was Leo she was grateful for. He wished she would stop repeating herself. He did not want her to apologize to him. And all the while she was rustling about the kitchen appalled at the lack of provisions. Iva still seemed an eminent visitor, full of expectations and effusions. She had not quite set aside the prima donna and had yet to reassume the sister role. She must forget it when she sang her operas. But her two sons were grown now, and it was some years since her second divorce. She said she spent less time in her Paris apartment now and retreated to her tiny village in Lorraine to study her music and rest up. Did she ever have inklings over there of Leo’s missing place in her life?

But now she was here. They had lingered at the table. Leo had recounted the more encouraging aspects of what he called their parents’ solitary confinements, Mom in the nursing home, Dad in assisted living.

“But it can’t stay the same,” Iva said.