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## Impromptuvasik

by Ruut DeMeo

New York City, December 2046

“Even in overtone singing,” Anton said, “good pitch is still a virtue.”

Piper didn’t know what overtone singing was exactly. Her Father had started telling her about the terrible concert he’d attended the previous night, as soon as she’d walked through the door. He was holding a cup of cold coffee in his left hand, and tapping the Bösendorfer’s music shelf with his right index finger.

Piper thought the tapping was a bad habit for a concert pianist. But she couldn’t remember a time when he hadn’t done it. He made a marching beat with it, predictable and wise, only adding fills when absolutely necessary.

“I could see that,” she said, pouring milk into a glass for herself. “But I mean, is there ever a time when good pitch *wouldn’t* be a virtue?”

Anton smirked at his daughter. “You’d be surprised. There are so many flamboyant assholes in this line of work—“

“Dad, don’t say flamboyant.”

“Okay,” Anton said. He sipped his cold coffee.

Piper knew it was the same coffee she’d made for him hours earlier, before she’d left her parents’ house to have an abortion. All 23 years she’d been alive, she’d listened to him memorize

piano scores, and it helped her understand why her drank his coffee the way he did. One small portion at a time, savoring, pretending it was still new.

“Over-confident,” he corrected himself. “That’s what I meant to say. People who think they can do whatever they want and call it music. Bleh,” he stuck his tongue out. “It disgusts me.”

Usually Piper tolerated her Father’s frankness and embraced his stark Eastern European delivery of basically anything he wanted to tell her. But today was different.

“Well,” Piper said, swallowing three ibuprofens with a gulp of milk. “I’m sure they mean well.”

Anton put the cup on top of his piano. “Mean well?”

Piper knew her Father must’ve finished the rest of the coffee. He’d never have placed the mug down anywhere near his concert grand otherwise.

“Want a fresh cup, Dad?” she asked him, rinsing the milk glass and setting it to dry on the rack.

“No, I don’t. Thank you,” he answered. He stopped tapping on the piano. “Listen, Pipes,” he said, crossing his arms. “I need you to understand something.”

Normally Piper would have loved the way his “thing” sounded like “sing,” but today it made her raise her shoulder against her ear.

“I need you to understand that music isn’t just... whatever,” Anton said. He opened his arms wide to signify an infinite number of bad musical choices.

“Okay,” Piper said, looking at him. “But you were talking about overture singing—”

“Overtone,” he corrected her. “Yes, I was. But now I’m saying just make sure you don’t go around appreciating everything. Saying things like, ‘oh, but they must mean well,’” he said in a mock voice. “You are my daughter and you know better than that.”

Piper stared at him. *I should tell him I just aborted his grandchild.* She laughed through her nose. “Mm-kay, Dad. I won’t appreciate crap. And I’ll be sure to only like people who deserve to be liked.”

“That,” Anton waved his hands by his hips, “is not what I meant. You have a keen ear for what is excellent, it’s in your DNA. And I always hope,” he paused, pointing one of his hands past the kitchen somewhere, “that it guides you in the right direction.”

Piper shook her head. “What *you* think is the right direction,” she mumbled.

“What?”

It wasn’t worth it. Again, Piper kept it to herself. Everything. The way he’d always made her feel that her silly made-up songs had been inferior. Not real music. Less than Allic’s undeniable genius and mastery of the violin. Piper knew better than to let her Father turn this into another lecture about dropping out of school.

There was a noise at the front door.

Moments like these reminded Piper why she hated her parent’s open-concept apartment. Standing in the middle of the kitchen, she was clearly visible to her Mother entering through the door, which was almost a hundred feet away. There was nowhere to hide. Even the walls of her small room were made of glass cubes. And next to her narrow bed was an IKEA wardrobe filled with Allic’s things, as if his life was more important than hers. If she hadn’t absolutely had to, she would have never come back here. Allic, Piper’s older brother’s name, was short for Allicin, which was Elyse’s favorite disease-fighting chemical, and a name choice against which Anton had desperately fought.

“Hi, Piper,” her Mother said, closing the door behind her. She held the mail and keys in one hand, and a heavy briefcase in the other.

“I was just gonna go lie down,” Piper said.

Her Mother set her bag against a low cabinet by the door. This modern piece of furniture was supposed to signify the “mudroom area” of their apartment, where Elyse, Piper and Allic’s Mother, kept their shoes and baskets of woolen slippers neatly arranged.

Piper wished they had a real house with real walls and real rooms where one might easily get lost and never be found.

“You feeling sick?” Elyse asked, eyeing her daughter. Or at least Piper thought her Mother was looking at her from behind her wire-framed glasses. The two women stood just far enough apart for Piper not to know for sure.

“Did you eat anything?” Elyse continued. “You look pale. You might be hungry.”

“Not hungry,” Piper said, turning to the hall.

“Piperine,” Elyse called, her voice raised to the pitch that Piper knew meant her Mother wanted to have a serious exchange. Piper hated her full name, but Elyse, being a chemist, had thought it more accurate to name her black-haired daughter after the chemical that gives pepper its pungency. Only she hadn’t realized that a lot of babies are born with dark hair, and by the time she was two, the girl ended up looking exactly like all the blonde women in Elyse’s Dutch lineage.

Piper sighed and leaned against the corner. “What?” She looked at her parents, who were silently communicating to each other with wide eyes and mouths and animate hand gestures. “I can see the whole room from here,” she said, the sarcasm oozing off her tongue. “I know you’re dying to talk about me. Why don’t you just let me go away? I’m tired.”

Elyse walked past her husband into the “kitchen area” and set the mail down on the high counter. “No, I think it’s time we talk to you now,” she said.

“You’re all done talking about me behind my back?” Piper said.

Elyse cocked her head and gave her daughter a look of pity. “It’s been a week,” she said. “Don’t you think it’s time you tell us why you came home?”

“What do you mean?” Piper said, feeling her face redden. Here was the conversation she’d been trying to avoid.

“You know what we mean,” said Anton, joining his wife at the counter. “You know we’d do anything to help you. But we’d like to know why you need our help.”

Elyse was nodding along with her husband. She looked at Piper. “Are you out of money?” she asked. “Did you lose your job?”

Piper rolled her eyes and immediately hated herself for doing it. Most 23-year-olds didn’t roll their eyes at their parents. But hers were making her feel like a piece of shit. Why couldn’t they just let her be there for a few weeks while she figured out her next move?

“What do you think?” she said. “Of course I lost my job.”

“But I thought it was such a good fit,” Elyse said, walking to the fridge. She pulled out a bottle of Chardonnay and unscrewed the top. “When I talked to Amy in the spring, she told me you were doing an awesome job for her.”

Piper closed her eyes.

*Amy.* At the thought of her old boss, Piper’s body flooded with the shame she’d tried to numb for the past two months. No, Amy wouldn’t have told Elyse, her roommate from college, that she’d caught Piper having sex with Amy’s husband. She’d done none of the typical wife stuff, Piper thought. The freaking out and kicking him out. She hadn’t even threatened to divorce Jeff. The truth was, Amy hadn’t told Elyse what happened because she wanted to keep up the illusion of her “perfect life.” Piper had sensed the competition between her Mother and Amy as soon as she was old enough to understand such things. Having Piper come work for them hadn’t been a favor for

an old college roommate; it had been Amy's way of rubbing it in. *Aww, look, your loser college-dropout daughter ended up being my domestic help.*

But that wasn't why Piper had messed around with Jeff. No, not to shake up Amy's perfect world. She didn't care about Amy. She had really fallen for him. In Piper's eyes, Jeff was perfect. Manly and rough, unlike the men in her family. He joked about actual funny things and made funny noises to make his kids laugh, unlike her own Father whose intellectual, Eastern European humor often had the opposite effect. Jeff's graying hair was messy, his cheeks flushed year-round from working outdoors. A construction worker. A real man.

In fact, Piper couldn't understand why Amy had ended up with him. It was almost as if Amy had selected him for his perfect kind, funny, athletic genes, knowing her intellect and drive and upper-class breeding would be enough to get her kids into the right schools. Something like that.

Of course Amy's need to keep the illusion of perfection going had worked in Piper's favor. She'd been relieved when Amy just gently fired her with a text message. But what she'd really wanted was for Jeff to love her back, to leave Amy. Piper had actually considered telling Jeff about the baby. It was his. Would he have loved her back if she'd told him?

What they'd had - even for a short while - had felt real. Exciting. *It's kind of scary how into you I am*, he had said to her in the laundry room that first time. She knew that's what Jeff said because she asked him to repeat himself twice over the rumble of the dryer.

Like any other day, Piper had been there to receive Jeff and Amy's twin boys from middle school. Piper was having trouble with her roommate and liked being at the Spencer's house better, especially during the day when it was empty. But that day, as if materializing from her daydreams, Jeff had come home for lunch from his construction job. He offered Piper a sandwich and a cider. They stood side by side against the kitchen island, tasting each other's ciders, joking around. Jeff

must have known that Piper had a crush on him. She could hardly breathe, even now remembering, when his rough finger had suddenly traced the neckline of her shirt.

“Honey?” Elyse said. Piper felt her Mother’s white wine breath on her cheek.

Piper lifted her hand where she’d felt it.

Elyse stood too close and stared at Piper. “How did you lose your job? Did Amy fire you?”

Piper pulled her hand down and looked at it, almost expecting to see dirt. Or blood.

Bile rose up in the back of her throat. She wanted to crumble like cracking glass onto the floor and roll around in her own shards. She wanted to die, like her unformed baby had. The one she’d walked away from just hours ago. The pain and wetness was still fresh between her legs.

Piper needed to lie down. But even more, she needed to feel her Mother’s arms around her, to hear her say *it’s going to be okay*. But that had never been the way between them. Elyse’s habits with her children were awkward and scientific. She was more likely to smell them for clues of unhappiness than to rush to them with open arms.

Elyse’s most recent research had resulted in an ingestible that, if taken before entering social situations, would alert the person when someone near them had aggressive motives. Her lab had sold the patent and the pill was now in development with a major drug company.

“What’s the matter?” Elyse asked, inspecting her daughter’s face. Elyse was squinting, as if she were looking at some sort of unknown species. “We can’t help you if you don’t tell us—”

“There’s nothing to tell,” Piper said. She felt her lips start to quiver.

Piper walked into her room and shut the door. She didn’t turn on the light, knowing her parents would be watching her movements through the glass wall. She fell onto the narrow bed and roared high whispers into her pillow, biting it, until her teeth and jaw hurt. Her whole body was tense

with anger. Sweat covered every limb of her body under her jeans and sweatshirt. The moist pad between her legs shifted, and she could feel it leave a wet mark of blood along her inner thigh.

*I deserve this.*

Piper cried soundlessly into her bedding. A wet film of snot and tears spread onto the fabric.

There was only one person who could help her.

*Gramzee.*

\* \* \* \* \*

The next morning, Piper took an e-ride to Pennsylvania. As soon as she sat down, she pushed the button on the screen to opt out of the car's conversation mode. She'd used the app on her Father's home-screen, hoping he'd be too scattered to realize what the receipt was for when it announced itself in the implant behind his ear. The quiet ride alone did Piper much good. By the time the car exited the Turnpike onto the upper express-lane that passed over Philadelphia, Piper felt that maybe things would turn out okay after all. She thought of dialing Gramzee's number, but opted to surprise her grandmother instead. Gramzee would be happy to see Piper. She'd let her stay as long as she needed, help her make sense of things.

Two hours later, the car passed a familiar sign: *Ridding Hill, est. 2020*. As soon as they entered it, Piper found her grandmother's development eerily quiet. There were no signs of life anywhere. She rushed up to Gramzee's house and knocked on the door, looking back briefly to see the car pull away and start its journey back to wherever e-cars knew to return. After it was gone, Piper heard no sounds anywhere. Even the November breeze traveled soundlessly through the neighborhood. She felt the chill reach under her sweater.

She knocked again.

On Gramzee's long covered porch there was a faded, pink sled with a crack all the way through it. It leaned against the yellow vinyl siding under the dining room window. No one had bothered to throw it away. Piper remembered it was bright red when they'd first gotten it. She also remembered only using it that one winter. When she was ten.

It was just like her grandmother to leave it there for her grandkids, thinking they'd be back to use it any day.

Gramzee didn't come to the door. Piper pulled the handle of the screen door. It was unlocked, as was the brass knob of the front door.

"Gramzee?" she shouted. The air inside was dank. The smell of something rotten permeated the rooms. Piper covered her nose with her forearm and breathed through her mouth, which wasn't any less repulsive. She flipped the light switch for the entryway, but the room remained dim. The house was quiet, except for a clock that still ticked over the fireplace in the dining room. It must have been running on rechargeable batteries. Gramzee was the only person Piper knew who still had those. Let alone the plug-in chargers.

The kitchen was surprisingly clean and dry, as if no one had used it for days. Piper turned on the faucet. She could feel a pipe respond somewhere in the depths of the house, but it produced nothing. Not even a drip. The nasty odor was stronger here, and she covered her nose. "Gram?" Piper shouted again. "Are you home?" She stood on the beige tiles of the kitchen, noticing a dried puddle of something brown under the fridge. How long had the power been out? The water cut off?

Piper hurried upstairs, where the landing was brighter with its tall windows. They were covered with Gramzee's old lace curtains, which she'd kept from her farm. Their flared hems looked out of place touching the teal berber carpet, as did all her heavy, wooden antique furniture in this house

built not quite thirty years ago. Piper had spent her childhood here, memorizing which of the spindles in the railing were loose, which stair squeaked under the Berber runner.

Her grandmother's darkly stained furniture had always seemed so much sturdier than the floors on which it stood. When the bathroom door's hinges had come loose on the cheap particle-board doorframe, the doors on Gramzee's cabinet in the dining room, which was filled with delicately painted antique Dutch dinnerware, still opened faithfully and clicked closed, the latches fitting perfectly in their metal clasps.

Finding the door to Gramzee's bedroom closed, Piper's heart lost its rhythm for a moment and oxygen didn't quite reach her lungs. She felt dizzy, but then steadied herself, turned the knob and pushed the door open. Its bottom edge dragged on the carpet.

The room was chilly. A window was open. Piper lowered her hand from her mouth, filling her chest with cleaner air. Gramzee's poster-bed was made, the blue and white colonial quilt stretched over it and tucked neatly at the bottom corners of the thick mattress. Her needlework pillows were arranged over the blanket. *Home Sweet Home*. The one with a butterfly on it. And the one with the Dutch proverb that Piper had seen a million times but had always neglected to ask Gramzee about. *Oost West. Thuis Best*.

Piper opened the bifold doors of Gramzee's small closet. A pair of small black shoes shifted sideways as the door opened, as if someone was dancing in them. Piper pulled on the string to turn on the light, realizing afterwards it wouldn't work anyway. She ran her hand over her grandmother's blouses and skirts, and a real mink coat from the 90's, which she couldn't believe had survived. You couldn't even find those in thrift shops anymore.

An old-fashioned vacuum leaned against the back corner, the kind that still had to be plugged into a wall socket. Gramzee's house was the only place Piper had ever had to plug anything in.

She thought of all the quiet houses on the street and wondered if they all still required owning electronics with cables and plugs. New houses just kept everything charged all the time; the technology was built right into the walls. You could sit in the kitchen and pick a wall on which to project your screen.

One Christmas, Piper and Allic had pooled their money and bought their grandmother a charging pad. They'd personally adhered it onto the living room wall behind her couch, where she didn't have to *ever see that ugly thing*, but mostly because on the couch was where they'd liked to sit with their devices. But the charging pad had messed with the reception on Gramzee's plug-in television, and when she'd refused to replace it with a wireless one, the pad had been taken off and thrown out.

*Where are you?* she thought, touching Gramzee's clothes on the hangers. The smell from the kitchen was creeping up into the room and the light was dimming outside. It would be night soon, and there apparently was no more connection here. It was dead silent. Since arriving, Piper hadn't sensed the usual buzz behind her ear whenever a message came in. Or the ding that indicated the hour. The bell chime that kept society on schedule.

For some reason, this realization made Piper's skin crawl.

She walked through the rest of the rooms upstairs. No sign of her grandmother. The smell was getting unbearable and she went back downstairs holding a towel she'd taken from the bathroom closet over her face. The downstairs was empty, too. All that was left to check was the garage. That was the only door she couldn't open. She stood in the laundry room, holding the knob with one hand and the towel over her nose with the other, her breath making the pink terrycloth warm and moist.

Piper thought about the empty driveways. She knew that Gramzee's (ancient, 2032) red Chevy still ran on gasoline, unlike her neighbors' new solar-powered ones. So it could still be in the garage, where she kept it, while everyone else kept theirs charging outside. But none of the neighbors' cars had been there. *What the hell is going on?*

She rummaged in a junk drawer for the key, only to find it hanging on a hook by the garage door. Next to it was a note taped to the wall. Piper recognized Gramzee's familiar cursive.

*They will get us all in the end. We die on a trash heap, whether it's made of money or trash.*

Piper swallowed and tried to steady her breath. She turned the key.

Again, she flipped the switch out of habit, as if it would do anything.

Gramzee had backed her car in. The windows were rolled up. The exhaust pipe in the back was taped over carefully with yellow duct tape.

Piper's throat tightened and she neared the driver's side. Her eyes stung and tears blurred her vision as she spotted her white-haired grandmother, shriveled and lying still against the brown-leather middle partition. Piper couldn't see her face, but Gramzee's thin wrist lay lifeless and gray on the seat, her shoulder hunched forward. She was wearing her favorite maroon cardigan. The bones of her back poked into it slightly, as if she'd already begun turning into a skeleton.

Piper held her breath, knowing if she took another through that damp, warm towel, she would throw up. She scrambled out of the house, her heart pounding in her chest. She ran to the end of the cul-de-sac and screamed towards the power lines, her body jerking with shock when vomit came pouring out with the sound. She collapsed onto the dry grass, breathing in the earthy scent, as if it would save her.

\* \* \* \* \*

Ridding Hill, January 2034

“Shh,” Gramzee said, lifting a crooked finger in front of her thin lips. “The new president is about to speak.” The words *president* and *speak* sounded silly to Piper when Gram said them.

“But I need you to zip up my coat,” Piper whined. “I already put on my mittens—”

“Where’s your brother?” asked Gramzee without turning away from her plug-in TV screen. “Come here,” she said, signaling for Piper to stand beside her, “but be quiet.”

Gram zipped up Piper’s coat, her eyes fixed on the black woman on the screen. In the live broadcast, snow was falling onto the high, braided bun on top of the black woman’s head.

As she spoke, Piper noticed the gap between her teeth.

“She’s the new president?” asked ten-year old Piper. “What’s her name again?”

Gramzee looked down at her granddaughter, lifted the collar of her puffy coat around her neck and zipped it all the way to her chin. “Madam President,” Gram said with a grin. “Madam President Lewiston. She’s going to change a lot of things in this country. Already has,” Gramzee said, turning to watch TV again.

Piper listened to the speech for a few more minutes, but let her eyes travel to the window. Thick flakes of snow fell outside in heavy shifts, as if someone in the white sky was tossing handfuls of it everywhere. There hadn’t been a blizzard like this since the year Piperine was born. She walked out of the house, pulling a plastic sled the color of a firetruck behind her. Allic was already on top of Ridding Hill, getting ready to slide down.

“Wait for me!” Piper yelled after him.

Allic waved and grinned. His dark hair poked from under his winter hat. She watched him race down the hill in his own green sled with two other boys his own age, reaching the end faster than both of them. Allic was always winning. He’d played violin since he was seven, and now at

thirteen, was about to start studying under a master violinist, one of Anton's conservatory friends, in the City.

It seemed to Piper that their family, or some configuration of it, was always in the car, driving from Gramzee's in Pennsylvania back to their house in Jersey, to Princeton for her Mother's research, or to the city for her Father's work. Eventually, in a handful of years, the family would end up in a loft apartment in the City and see Gramzee less and less.

But tonight, Allic and Piper sat on her couch, their fingers thawing and missing their devices, which didn't come with plug-in chargers and therefore had to be left at home. They had to settle for watching Gramzee's TV, which was fixed on a news channel all night, even long after the black woman with braids had finished her speech.

That night Piper asked Gramzee why they didn't call her "Grandma."

"Because," Gram said, licking melted caramel off her thin fingers, "my name is Zelda. It's not easy for babies to say. So Allic made up Gram-Z."

"But why didn't you just let us call you Grandma? I don't think any of my friends know their grandmothers' first names," said Piper.

"And do you think I'm just like all your friends' grandmothers?"

Piper smiled. "No."

"Exactly," said Gram. "Just like you, Piperine. Everyone is all different all the time. Even if they think they are blending in. Even if they want to blend in. They never will."

Piper turned to watch the people talking to each other on the screen. "Who wants to blend in?" she asked, thinking of the machine Gramzee plugged into the wall that mixed ingredients for all her favorite Dutch pastries.

Gram dipped the last piece of her caramel wafer into her tea and ate it, licking her fingers again. “Sometimes we have to. Like chamel—chamele—how do you say?”

“Chameleons,” Allic said, keeping his eyes on the television.

Piper wasn’t aware her brother had been listening.

“Thanks, Allic. Sometimes we must blend into the world, to be safe, like those animals. But when we are alone, ah!” Gram pointed to the ceiling, as if she’d just had a bright idea. “When no one is watching, we can be ourselves. Really ourselves. New. Like no one has ever been. And when we get old - I know, because I am old - we only want to be that person, the one we discover when we’re alone. And I am Gramzee,” she said, putting her hands on her chest and closing her eyes, as if introducing herself. “I’m not grandma.” She looked at Piper and smiled. “You see?”

Piper did see. Though it would take her another thirteen years to know.

\* \* \* \* \*

New York, December 2046

“We knew,” Elyse said. “But she didn’t want our help—”

“It just seems like something you should have told me,” Piper said, barely able to form the words. “Kind of a big deal. That she was gonna lose her home.”

Elyse stood motionless, staring into the open refrigerator.

Piper could see black streaks on the back of her Mother’s hand, which was holding the door. Elyse had worn mascara for the first time in decades. Why? For the New York Times?

The photographer hadn’t asked for Elyse to be in the photos, in fact, now that Piper thought of it, the journalists had barely acknowledged her mother’s presence in the loft.

“That’s the thing about family, isn’t it,” Piper continued, feeling emboldened, “you don’t need to be asked. You don’t wait—you find out that something is wrong and you help.” She stopped to catch her breath. “You just—help. That’s what you do. When it’s family.”

Elyse had turned to look at her daughter, still hanging onto the open fridge door. “This isn’t about Gramzee anymore,” she said flatly. “Pipes.” Elyse closed the refrigerator, having taken out a half-empty bottle of chardonnay. “You need to tell me something?”

Piper felt a cold sweat rise to the surface of her skin under her mother’s stare. “No. Why?”

Elyse shrugged and unscrewed wine cap. “I don’t know. Just thought you might know why there was a three hundred dollar charge on my visa at a Planned Parenthood upstate from last week—“

“Abortion,” Piper said before she could stop herself. “It was an abortion, okay?” She took the wine bottle from Elyse. “I was pregnant with Jeff’s baby,” Piper said, reaching for a glass with a shaking hand. Without looking at her mother, Piper continued, “We fucked around. That’s why Amy fired me. And I got pregnant.”

Elyse stood motionless holding the wineglass at her lips.

“But you know,” Piper said, emptying the light yellow liquid out of the bottle, shaking the last drop into her full glass, “Gramzee just killed herself in her old car, so I figured my news might not be as big of a deal.”

Elyse set her glass down. She inhaled sharply, as if to gather some kind of wisdom from the air in the apartment. Nothing in Elyse’s life had prepared her for her own mother committing suicide, her daughter being so reckless. There was no logic to any of it. “I suppose you blame me for everything—”

“Please,” Piper stopped her. “Don’t make this about you. Maybe Gramzee had a purpose for what she did—”

“A purpose?” Elyse snapped. “What kind of animal chooses to live that way? In a condemned house? Over a trash-heap? She’s always been peculiar with her old ideas and traditions. But this—this was something even your father and I couldn’t have predicted.”

Piper swallowed the rest of her chardonnay. The effect of the alcohol was immediate on her empty stomach. She welcomed it, wished her glass was full again. “Is that the thing, then?” Piper said, a smile forcing itself on her lips. “Predictability? I mean, didn’t you hear what they were asking me?” Piper signaled to the living room couch, where she’d just been interviewed. “*How did you choose the melody you sang?*” Piper laughed through her closed teeth. “The fucking *New York Times*. You must hate it, mom. I mean, here you’ve put all your energy into Allic’s brilliant music career and then I’m the one who gets interviewed for singing a dumb song, and all this time—all your life—the only thing you wish you could do is predict how everyone is going to behave! That’s the real reason you didn’t go see her, isn’t it?” Piper’s voice grew vehement. “You left her to die. You left her! Gramzee was too savage for you. Too much of a wild-card. Well, guess what, Mom?” Piper threw her wine tumbler against the glass-cubed wall. It shattered to the floor. “I’m just like her! And now they’re figuring out that the problem isn’t people like us.” She pointed at her heaving chest, then at her mother. “It’s people like you!”

Anton walked in through the front door, setting his umbrella down. “What is happening? I hear the glass break. Accident, I hope.”

“I’m a fuck-up!” Piper shouted to him. “And I’m gonna end up just like Gramzee if I don’t get the hell out of this open-concept apartment—”

“Stop!” Elyse screamed. “You need to grow up! You have no respect for hard work. This—  
this *New York Times* article will pass and—”

“What?” cried Anton. “What *New York Times* article?”

“I don’t give a shit about the *New York Times*,” Piper said to her parents. She sighed. “But you  
knew about Gramzee. And you let her die.”

\* \* \* \* \*

The New York Times

December 2, 2046

### **23-year old stumbles on renewable energy source**

#### **amid condemned development**

After discovering her deceased grandmother in a garage in Pennsylvania, New York woman,  
Piperine Dovasik, 23, says she “was singing” when the lights came on.

It is not known how long her grandmother, Zelda Anders, who had committed suicide by  
breathing in the fumes of her gas-run vehicle, had been inside the garage, though Dovasik says  
there was a strong putrid odor permeating the house. Authorities are still investigating the situation.

Piperine, or “Piper” Dovasik is a former student of New York University, where she completed  
nearly a semester studying music pedagogy. She had gone up to visit her grandmother in the  
suburban development of Ridding Hill, which was recently condemned due to problems with water  
and gas from a century-old landfill, over which the complex was built in 2020. Ridding Hill’s  
former residents have been given temporary housing in nearby Pennsylvania towns, all except

Anders, who had seemingly chosen to “wait out the storm.” According to Ridding spokeswoman, Candy Chett, the company was unaware that any residents remained behind. “It didn’t even cross our minds that anyone would choose to stay,” says Chett. “Otherwise,” she claims, “we would have notified Anders’s family immediately.” The State of Pennsylvania cleared for water and electric to be shut off over thirty days ago.

After discovering her grandmother’s dead body in the car, Ms. Dovasik had run out, then returned and started singing a “random melody to soothe her own nerves.” And that’s when it all happened. The garage light and door stirred back to life.

Scientists have been studying AIME (Acousto-Inductive Magnetic Energy, aka. “acoustinductive energy”) for decades. So far, it’s been confirmed that the unit of power that is produced by sound (the Watt) can cause electricity when in contact with certain magnetic and chemical compounds. The element missing from the research seems to have been accidentally found by Ms. Dovasik. And that is the element of surprise. No joke.

“What we’re consistently seeing is that as long as the system can’t predict what the sound will be, the compounds react with a big enough surge that creates electricity,” says Swedish scientist Neil Hammen, whose award-winning research into renewable energy has helped European governments pass new laws and make big headway in alternative sources of electricity.

The chemicals he’s referring to here are a combined byproduct of certain types of (at least) 100-year old landfills. Prior to the EPA’s strict regulations on landfill content in the early 2020’s, it was impossible to keep people from throwing away charging pads, for instance, though they should have always been disposed of under strict supervision. Other waste items that might have added to this deadly amalgam (albeit one that might just be the key to acoustinductive energy), are

LED lightbulbs, battery acid, synthetic carpet fibers, plastic, outdated charging pads and other manmade substances and devices.

Being the only source of human sound in the vicinity of these chemicals, Dovasik literally energized the house with her singing. She describes the moment as “otherworldly, not knowing if it was really happening or not. It felt like some weird sci-fi thriller,” she told the Times. But as a result of the freakish experience, she’d been able to connect herself and call for help.

So, what was different about Dovasik’s singing (which was “full of sadness,” in her own words) compared to the sound that scientists had been using before? Was it that she was mourning her grandmother?

“This is the unpredictability factor we hadn’t thought of before,” says Hamnen, “and we’ve had positive outcomes so far only when there’s a live human present in the lab, making the sounds.” According to scientists, the “not knowing” has to be what made the difference.

What might this potentially mean for our infrastructures? Will we one day be able to turn on the lights by humming a simple tune? That certainly seems to be a possibility, though there is a big caveat. Hamnen and the entire global community of scientists who have come together since the discovery are still figuring out exactly how to “bottle the magic” and make it a source of energy on which we can rely. “But that’s just the thing,” Hamnen concludes. “It only works when no one knows what sound will come out next, so you wouldn’t be able to use a recording, or a perfect performance of any kind. Only spontaneous sounds have worked so far. And as you know,” he says with a laugh, “any system that relies on unpredictability to work, is basically a nightmare for scientists.”

The name for this discovery is still under debate. But “The Impromptuvasik” does have a sort of strange Old World musical ring to it.