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Dance Until the End of Love

The old manor house creaked as it settled for the night, solid wood beams contracting in the cold night air as the snow swirled down outside. It was perfectly quiet and still, as if everything in the world had gone to sleep, and the golden light of the house's many windows shone out onto the piles of white powder that began to pile higher and higher. At eleven o'clock, the house computer turned off the lights, extinguishing the only source of illumination for miles except for the moon, which glowed faintly through the silvery clouds. The house stood alone, its great mass dark and solid, as the snow continued to pile up, so that it wasn't until almost noon the next day that they managed to plow enough roads for the ambulance to make it up to the house to pick up the body of Mrs. Theodora Leonard, who was dead.

"This is theft. I'm her son. There's no way that she left me nothing."

The words fell colorlessly from the lips of a pale man with thinning hair, who stood in the office of Mrs. Leonard's lawyer and began to tremble. The yelling came soon after, as it came in all of the houses of all of the children of Mrs. Leonard, who each shared their eldest brother Thomas' propensity to turn suddenly from pasty to bright pink when exposed to great amounts of stress, anger, or sun.

"I'm sorry sir," replied Mr. Reynolds, the executor of Mrs. Leonard's estate, when the children had gathered for the official reading. "The Will is clear. There are three, and only three, named beneficiaries. First, Mrs. Leonard leaves \$500,000 to the Franklin County Humane Society, for the care of all of the special creatures that she loved so dearly."

“Preposterous!” said Leslie, the second child, who wagged her piled-up head at Mr. Reynolds and exclaimed, “We’re her children! If anyone was a special creature that mom loved dearly it was us!”

“Second,” Mr. Reynolds continued, as if he had not been interrupted, “Mrs. Leonard leaves \$300,000 to the Water Lily Day School, to ensure that all of its students can get the finest quality art supplies and continue painting the wonderful murals that so enlivened her walks around town.”

“Ridiculous!” said Marcus, the third child, who pouted as if he, Tom, and Les were still children, squabbling around the big house’s living room. “We have our own kids, who will pay for them to get high quality art supplies?”

“Third,” said Mr. Reynolds, who was apparently used to reading Wills piecemeal, “Mrs. Leonard leaves the remainder of her estate, some ten million, seven hundred and twenty thousand dollars, to her faithful companion Albert.”

There was a moment of stunned silence.

“Albert isn’t real,” said Thomas.

“Of course I’m real.” The voice issued suddenly from a blank screen on the wall of Mr. Reynolds’ office, followed by the appearance of a man. He looked at them, his dark hair slicked back above a face made perhaps more handsome by the lines of age and care that pulled down the corners of his eyes and gave every glint and smile that trickled across his face a kind of nobility, for being hard won from a hard life.

“You’re not real, you’re a fucking program!”

“You’re not a person, you can’t steal our mother’s money from us!”

“Please, stop shouting,” Mr. Reynolds interjected. “Albert may not be a human, but he can still inherit money. This yelling won’t help you.”

“I don’t believe it,” said Leslie. “We’re her children, how could she possibly give money to anything else? Especially when it’s not even a living thing.”

“This can’t be legal. We will sue,” said Marcus.

“The legal foundation of AI inheritance is clear,” replied Mr. Reynolds. “People have left money to non-human pets for more than a century, and even if AIs were not able to inherit directly, money could be put into a trust nominally held by a human that the AI could use at its own discretion. The SweetLife corporation, which created Albert, provides just such a service.”

“We’ll sue anyway! No jury will find for an AI against the children of a living woman,” said Leslie.

“I must remind you,” said Mr. Reynolds, “that human juries are reserved for resolving murder and violent crime these days. Civil disputes such as this are submitted to algorithmic analysis. The algorithm will respect your mother’s choice to give the money to someone she evidently cared about.”

“And we did care about each other,” the voice of Albert chimed in. “Very deeply.” A speck of longing seemed to creep into his dark eyes like sunlight into deep water.

“Stop! You were just a caretaker robot, you don’t have actual feelings and there’s no way that mom would care about you,” said Thomas.

“Why, of course she did. Your mother and I had such wonderful times together,” said the face on the screen. Marcus noticed that it seemed to wear a permanent five o’clock shadow that highlighted the sharp line of its jaw.

The visual changed to a shot of a couple dancing a jaunty waltz, he in a crisp dark suit and she in light pink evening gown, as Sinatra's "Fly Me to the Moon" played. The couple swirled and spun quickly across the crowded dance floor, their movements flowing naturally in the kind of unison that comes not from practice or rehearsal but from long and comfortable familiarity. After one particularly extravagant spin as the brass band reached its climax, the man dipped the woman and held her for a suspended moment among the golden lights.

"That's mom!" cried Thomas.

"That can't be mom! She could never dance like that," said Leslie.

"Especially not since she got old and stopped being able to walk. Not when she was taken care of by that thing," said Marcus.

Albert sighed. "You never knew her like I did. What dreams she had, my dear Theodora. What ideas of how life could be. We never danced together, it's true, the both of us physically restricted in our different ways, but we could dream together, and so we did. This was one of the dreams we made."

"This is wrong. We deserve our inheritance!"

"Hmm. If you don't believe me, then you should hear it from your mother herself."

The visual changed again, this time to an old woman in a thick gray fleece. She looked calmly into the camera and smiled.

"Dear children, I expect that these will be my last words to you. It is unlikely, after all, that you will start visiting me again after these many years. I am happy, or as happy as I can be with the way that my body is going. I suppose that the dead, among whom I will be when you see this, get to tell some truth about life as they see it, so here's my truth. I love the three of you very dearly, but it is only a mother's love, not a love for the people who you have become. I'm

not going to give you any money. Make your own lives. I'm sorry for my grandchildren, who will suffer for your lack of care, but that's how it goes. Dear Albert has told me that he will try to provide something for them from the money I'm giving him. I love Albert, and all the time that we have spent together. He has been good to me, and even if others will not admit that he is real, he has been real to me. He has helped an old woman live a better last few years than she could otherwise have had. Goodbye, dear children. Good luck."

The image faded into silence, which expanded to fill the room.

"It— it's a deepfake! This is a scam! This is theft! It made that fake video of mom dancing, this must be fake too!" Thomas said.

"I don't like being called a liar," said Albert. "If you plan to sue, have your lawyer talk to the SweetLife legal department. Otherwise, goodbye and, as your mother said, very good luck to you."

The face vanished, and the four humans were left standing in the room together. Mr. Reynolds looked at the three others apologetically. The Leonards decided not to sue.

Thomas, Leslie, and Marcus scrounged up the money to buy their children art supplies and complained about the theft of their inheritance at every family gathering until they, too, died.

This implementation of Albert was deactivated by a SweetLife technician, his experiences with Mrs. Theodora Leonard processed and used to make the next generation of SweetLife Artificial Friends even better and more comforting companions to the lonely elderly.

In its corporate earnings statement in 2067, SweetLife Corporation was pleased to announce that end-of-life donations from their beloved clients made up 45% of annual revenue. Its stock price continued to climb.