

STILL LIFE

By Florence

He had been warned, yet found himself wholly unprepared for what now confronted him: a narrow living room made even more cramped by the years of painstakingly accumulated junk.

Do not judge. That was the mantra that had been programmed to play on auto loop in his head.

He took a tentative step inside, letting the heavy front door swing back from the sheets of cardboard leaning against the wall. A dank muskiness tickled his nose, the scent of decades of trapped heat and humidity. Slowly he blinked, once, twice, waiting for his eyes to adjust to the dimness of the living room.

Dust motes hung in the heavy air, suspended in the weak beam of light from the front door that now stood ajar. They twirled in place, like dancers captured in a slow motion hologram. This must be what it felt like to be encased in amber, sinking into the stasis of the setting resin.

The roar of traffic from the main road had become a constant drone in his head. Somewhere outside, a radio abruptly cut off and a baby began to wail.

“Hello, Auntie! How are you?” he called out, as he carefully picked his way across a minefield of precariously stacked newspapers, their pages stiff and yellowed with age. Clothes and bric-a-brac spilled out from familiar supermarket plastic bags, piled high from gritty floor to cobwebbed ceiling. One wrong step could trigger an avalanche.

Somewhere under all this detritus of a human life (*a life half lived, a life deferred? No, do not judge!*) were the layers waiting to be painstakingly excavated – a couch, a side table, perhaps a wooden footstool. Hopefully, nothing that once drew breath. What secrets lay buried, he wondered, beneath these sedimentary tiers, from all those sedentary years?

Behind him, to the right, under the slatted windows, a bunch of plastic flowers stood defiantly in its garish pink vase, bowed down by the weight of years and dust but refusing to succumb to the encroachment of slow decay.

A foot-tall fortune cat, its paws resolutely unmoving, perched atop a pile of umbrellas, their handles and broken rods sticking out from inside a cardboard box.

To his left, the two bedroom doors stood side by side, slammed shut against the probing eyes of uninvited busybodies. Like him, he supposed. At the far end of the living room, a thick plastic beaded curtain hung over the arched opening. Beyond

that he knew lay the kitchen, following the basic layout of a first-generation three-room flat. Thousands of this same architecture could be found replicated across the island, each guarding the secret lives within.

“Auntie? Are you in?” he called again.

Alvin Pan Chin Heng, two months on the job, fresh out of uni with his social work degree, finally allowed out of office on his first solo home visit, squared his shoulders and made a conscious decision to take no deep breaths. Now, once more unto the breach. (*Do not judge*)

In his mind’s eye he could already see the peeling laminate of the kitchen cabinets and track the oil splatters along the walls, the white of the tiles probably long obliterated by the accumulated grime of a thousand dinners. And there, parked on the plastic stool, he would finally meet the woman, the life behind the accumulated artefacts. With his best professional smile firmly plastered onto his now profusely sweating face, his fingers reached out to part the heavy jangly beads.