

Notice of Closure
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**We will be permanently closing down soon.
Those in need can pickup food and items for free.**

This notice hung by the entrance all morning, but nobody had spotted it yet. It was right next to the official MySejahtera 2D code display, above a shelf with the hand sanitiser and thermal scanner. Anyone who came in had to pass through there. Since opening up this morning, a few Malay housewives came by, a young Indian man bought drinks, a man in sunglasses bought cigarettes, and a few scruffy kids bought candy. Nobody asked, neither did he point it out. He handled the cash register as usual, counting out every single sen.

When there were no customers, he went out and tugged at the notice to straighten it out a bit more.

He had written the notice himself. He suddenly decided to do it just as he was about to leave the house this morning. So he ripped up a cardboard box, cut out a nice square piece, and used a marker pen to write out the two sentences in big Chinese characters.

But this wasn't a spur-of-the-moment thing. His old wife had been asking him to close the shop for years now. He didn't have much opinion about it either way, and so things had simply dragged on until today when he finally made up his mind.

"I'll go and hang it up right after this. Let's just give everything away," he said to his wife.

His wife, in a porcelain urn, neither agreed nor objected.

Counting back, it was almost a year now since his wife had been burned into ashes and put into the urn. It was an exquisite urn that was meant to be placed in the cinerarium at the cemetery. The place was not very far — in fact it was the nearest cemetery from their house. But still, it was almost thirty kilometres away, and getting there meant crossing district borders. In these exceptional times, crossing into another district was no easy task; thirty kilometres meant the difference between earth and sky. He felt deeply uneasy about it, so he declined the funeral parlour's arrangements and, against his children's advice, chose to keep the urn at home until the pandemic was over. He cleared out a space on the display shelf in the living room

and there he placed his old wife.

And so, every day he would speak a few words to that urn.

After writing the closure notice, he got ready to leave. In the sweltering July heat, the smell of durians wafted in from outside. His dog seemed to be in good spirits. Its appetite had improved over the last two days, and it had never liked to stay at home alone. Wanting to tag along, it painstakingly scrambled up into his small truck.

“Woofy, come down!”

The dog looked back at him from the driver’s cabin with glossy black eyes and a pleading whine in its throat. He unwittingly recalled how, before his late wife breathed her final breath in the isolation ward at the hospital, she had begged to go home but the nurse would not let her. They were only able to see each other for the last time through a video call over the phone. In that panicked moment, he kept yelling at her to get well soon, get well soon and then she could go home. The person in the screen struggled to make noises from the throat. An oxygen mark covered more than half of that gaunt face. At least the eyes were still hers.

After she died, even the dog could sense something. It suddenly became despondent and clung to him more than before. His wife was the one who had picked it up from the back alley, way back when it was still a freshly weaned puppy. A few days ago, he suddenly discovered that it was sick, so he took it to the vet and was asked, how old is this dog? His mouth gaping wide, he could not give an exact number. He could only remember that when his wife brought the puppy back home in her arms, her hair was still mostly black.

“Fifteen years old at least,” the vet said. “That is the equivalent of ninety over human years.” The vet pointed at the chart on the wall, filled with numbers.

Meaning to say, Woofy was very old, and the odds were not good. He felt at a loss, even more so than when he had first heard his wife’s diagnosis. Of course, back then he had not known that his wife would die, whereas in this case the implication behind the vet’s words were clear. This dog did not have many days left.

When his wife died, their two children had rushed home, and as quickly rushed back to where they’d come from, one in the north and one in the south. Since then, due to the movement control order, they were not able to come back for a visit. All that was left at home was one man and one dog. He told the children about Woofy’s condition over the phone, and they both suggested the exact same thing. Just go to the back alley and get another one; there were plenty of stray dogs there.

Little did they know that after their mother died, those stray dogs stopped coming.

Over the years, these dogs had learnt to come to the back alley in the evenings and loiter outside their back door. They would wait for that rusty grille to be pushed open with a loud creak, and then the lady of the house would put down a bowl of dog food mixed with rice, smile at them and say, time for dinner.

All the neighbours knew that the stray dogs gathered there every day because of her. Stray dogs covered with filth and frequent wounds, accompanied by an ever-present swarm of flies. The neighbour opposite the back alley would often peek at them from a small flap in their metal door, and sometimes some children would crack open the glass shutters ever so slightly and peer out from the shadows like black cats.

After adopting Woofy, his wife could not bear to see other dogs suffer. First she fed one dog, then two dogs, until eventually it became an entire pack. It so happened that most people in this neighbourhood did not like dogs. Even the kids knew how to scare them away with rods, or throw small firecrackers at them during festivals. On a few occasions, the neighbours even asked the local council to come and round up the dogs, which caused a huge commotion in the back alley. His wife stood in the way so that the dogs could escape, and the neighbours yelled at her as she merely smiled apologetically. But he could not help himself and rushed out to shout back at them, saying that the cats they kept weren't any better, peeing and pooping all over other people's yards. In the end, both sides refused to back down and things turned sour. From then on, every time he stepped out into the back alley, he was inevitably greeted with many hostile faces.

Once, some troublemaker even showed up at their doorstep and accused them for the disappearance of some cats from this house or that house.

His only response to that was a loud snort.

His wife told him then, your temper is getting worse with age, you really shouldn't be running a sundry shop. She told him to close the shop, retire. He didn't object. There were only two rows of shops in the area where they lived, and there was just this one sundry shop. Business used to be good. In fact, many of the Chinese residents nearby liked to gather there to chat. Every day as soon as the shop opened, they would come by in twos or threes. Some even brought along their own stools, talking and laughing all the way. But in the past few years, many of these familiar neighbours had either moved away to live with their children, or developed some elderly condition or other and had difficulty leaving the house. His shop became more and more deserted. The loss of business wasn't so bad in itself; the children were all grown up, and he and his

wife had saved up. But he had lived on this shop for so many years, and without it he was afraid he would have nothing left to do. So he kept delaying, and each year dragged on into the next.

After his wife died, he had to admit that it was difficult spending the days alone. The house was a mess and the old store assistant, who was lazy to begin with, started becoming more and more crafty. Just yesterday he caught her red-handed with a few cigarette packs hidden away. This time he'd had enough. He told her to leave and never come back. But despite it being just a small shop, there was a fair bit of work to do. To make matters worse, over the past year or so the government had announced all sorts of regulations due to the pandemic. Normally, people here didn't even care to wear helmets on motorcycles, so of course all these new restrictions meant nothing to them. But the police did make their rounds every once in a while, poised and ready to record another entry in their summons book. He became so fearful of them that on a few mornings, he found himself deliberately stalling for time at home because he didn't want to go to the shop.

Today was one such morning. He took some water and idly wiped down the urn of ashes several times.

"Today is as good a time as any," he said to the urn. "So today it is. I'll just give away everything in the shop, and that'll be the end of it."

Woofy had many memories with the old shop too. He couldn't bear to shoo it out of the truck. Once they arrived, he rolled up the shutters and lugged out the crates of bread, onions, garlic and potatoes, just like any other day. Then he hung up the notice he had written. Woofy made a quick round of inspection about the shop, and was soon trailed by two tiny kittens meowing with all their might, as if brimming with things to tell. As Woofy led them out of the shop, two filthy mongrels suddenly appeared out of nowhere and padded over to say hello.

After a busy morning, at noon he went to buy lunch from the homey restaurant a few doors down. When he came back, he saw the old store assistant he had fired yesterday standing outside the shop. Beside her stood a scrawny Indian girl of twelve or thirteen, wearing a dress a few sizes too big. As soon as the assistant saw him, she flashed a bright smile. Meanwhile, the girl squatted down to play with the kittens as Woofy looked on vigilantly, constantly trying to nudge the girl's hand away with its muzzle.

The store assistant had come to ask him to take her back in, but he knew all of her antics. Unbothered, he sat down to eat his food at the counter as she stood next to him with a pitiful face, blabbering away. It was the same old story, I promise I won't do it

again, we don't have any money to buy food, I've worked for you all these years, won't you please help..... over and over again, like a fly that refused to go away. By the time she finally stopped, he had lost his appetite and could barely swallow the rice in his mouth. There was still more than half left, along with some fish and meat, so he took it out to Woofy. The girl in the baggy dress shifted slightly out of his way, but continued squatting there as she watched Woofy eat. The two kittens also moved forward and picked out half a fried fish.

Pointing at the notice hanging outside, he told the old assistant that he was closing down the shop and wasn't hiring anymore. He had to repeat himself many times. Still the woman did not seem to believe him fully, although she did finally get onto her bicycle and leave. The girl didn't go with her. He asked the girl, hey, didn't you come with her? The girl shook her head and bit at her lip. Then, as if she had finally made up her mind, she stood up and looked over at the notice hanging by the entrance.

"Uncle," the girl called out to him in Malay. Her big bulging eyes looked cunning and pitiful at the same time, rather like that of the old assistant who had just left. Warily, he inclined his chin in response.

"You've written the notice wrongly," the girl said.

He was taken aback. Just then, an egg wholesaler walked past the shop. The man took one look at the notice, and without even putting down the egg cartons he was carrying, turned to the lorry idling out on the street and shouted at the woman to come down. He knew this couple, and so the woman naturally made a big deal of it. Meanwhile, the man had already rolled up his sleeves and was just about to step into the shop when he was stopped short.

"Can't you read? It's only for people who are in need."

Still they pushed forward shamelessly, but he glared fiercely at them until they finally dropped their heads and turned to leave. How naïve he was, they muttered sourly, he was just asking for thugs to come and clear out the entire shop.

He didn't reply. After they were gone, he turned around to find the girl in the baggy dress still standing there, as if she had been frozen to the spot.

He frowned. "What are you waiting for?"

The girl strode forward and pointed at the notice.

"You wrote that wrongly." This time she spoke in Chinese, her pronunciation so clear

and precise that he was stunned. "It should be 'pick up', not 'pickup'." She smiled gleefully at him, raising her chin high to reveal a gap in her mouth from a missing tooth.

Later, as the girl carried on playing with the kittens, he called her into the shop. He handed her a marker pen and a fresh piece of cardboard, and asked her to rewrite the notice with the correct wording.

"One more thing, how do you say these two sentences in Malay?" he asked. "Might as well write that down too."

Obediently, the girl leaned over the counter and, full of concentration, drew out each stroke as slowly and deliberately as if she were carving into wood. Watching her, he found it difficult to keep himself from laughing, so he stepped out to look for his dog instead. Woofy was sleeping along the five-foot way. Or maybe it wasn't really asleep but simply had its eyes closed; sensing his presence, it raised its head and glanced briefly at him. The two kittens, unbothered by the fact that their mother was nowhere to be found, had nestled into Woofy's side. There they lay huddled together in sweet sleep, completely oblivious to him as he stood there watching over them for a very long time.