

The Apartment

By Rick Urban

The stench is what assails you first. The door is barely open when it hits you like a sharp slap to the face followed by a low jab to the gut. The strange part is, once you get past the initial shock you simply have to wonder what could be causing such foulness.

You observe everything as you step into the two-room, first floor apartment. A single dim light bulb over the stove offers a glimpse of the world you are entering. The pale yellow glow displays a multitude of food-encrusted pots and pans splayed across the burners. Filthy plates, bowls, glasses, and silverware form a mountain of plastic and ceramic rising out of a lake of fetid dishwater. The beam of your flashlight causes a stampede of cockroaches as they scurry for cover amidst the mayhem of what is the kitchen.

Caution is your guide as you work your way further into the apartment. The soft crunch of flimsy cellophane wrappers flattening under each step telegraphs your approach. A squishy feeling on your next step tells you that not all of the small pastry packages are empty. “Shuffle steps from now on,” you tell yourself. “Just like a snowplow in winter, move the debris aside and keep going.”

A quick scan reveals a beaten up Bark-O-Lounger in the far corner with its heavily stained and randomly ripped fake leather. Next to the chair is a large beer stein, half filled with a golden liquid. You try to convince yourself that it is beer.

Nestled on a hassock in front of the chair is a small box, filled to overflowing with pictures. Some look to be old black and whites, while others are more recent color photos; but they are all of the same two people, a man and a woman at varying stages of life and love.

The stillness of the room makes you strain to hear any noise. The foul air is oppressive and deadens every sound. Then you hear it. Was it a groan, or maybe a jagged breath? Winding your way through the towers of daily newspapers and monthly periodicals, you peer around the partitioning wall and look into the sleeping area. If it's possible, the rankness of the odor is worse here because now it's mixed with the sickly sweetness of a lit, pumpkin and spice candle.

A king size mattress lies directly on the floor. There are no sheets to cover the yellow and brown splotches in its sunken middle. He's sprawled across the mattress, askew of the obvious cavity formed after many years of two bodies sleeping next to each other. Half dressed in a crusty white t-shirt and wrinkled black trousers, his unshaven face is pale and drawn. With every breath, his lips are sucked into his mouth, past gums with no teeth, making his face seem hollow.

Calling out his name, you notice his eyes flicker as he tries to open them. Kneeling down to check his pulse, you find a prescription bottle of sleeping pills still in his right hand. It's empty but had been filled yesterday. Your partner radios dispatch requesting extra manpower. This is now a race against time and chemicals if you are to have a chance to save his life.

Searching for other clues as to what else he might have taken, you look in his left hand. Wedged among his fingers is an obituary. You recognize the picture of the deceased as the woman from the photos in the box. She had been a part of his life for over fifty years. From the date on the paper, it appears she died one year ago today. As you start your work, you wonder if there will be another obituary written for this date.