

Ivory Suites

“What’s with the get-up? We’re just going to view houses.”

“It’s not every day I get to feel pretty, Fred-fred.” Debbie Yeo did a twirl in her black maxi dress, looking at herself in the dressing room mirror. She ran a hand across her flat tummy, marveling at how the dress flattered her body. A prompt to update her virtual model popped up but she swiped it away quickly.

Debbie felt that her outfit was missing something and decided to complete the look. A gold flat chain choker materialised around her neck when she tapped her collarbone with her fingers. “Done!” Debbie turned to her husband, Frederick Yeo, who donned a polo shirt and bermudas. She immediately clicked her tongue. “Couldn’t you have chosen something nicer to wear?”

“And squeeze with you, possibly messing up the rendering?” Frederick sized up the narrow path down the virtual dressing room with his hands. “No thanks. C’mon let’s log into Ivory Suites.”

Frederick pulled up a holographic screen in front of him with a flick of his wrist. One of the tabs glowed gold. ‘**IVORY SUITES WELCOMES YOU: 10 AM - 11 AM**’ was boldly written within. With a tap, the rendering of the dressing room crumbled in a pile of cubic pixels. Within seconds, the couple found themselves standing in the bustling virtual lobby of the real-estate company, Ivory Suites. In typical Singaporean fashion, avatars glanced at each other's profiles, with some exchanging contact information after a quick chat.

“Welcome to Ivory Suites! I’m Jonathan.” The receptionist greeted them with a sing-song voice when they approached the counter. “How may I assist you today?”

“We have an appointment with Michelle,” Debbie said.

The moment ‘Michelle’ left Debbie’s lips, Jonathan abruptly jerked to the left and someone else popped up next to him. “You are the Yeos? I am Michelle. Nice to meet you!” Michelle greeted

them with the same toothy smile plastered across Jonathan's face.

Debbie had to discreetly smack Frederick to compose him. "U-Uh yes! I'm Frederick. This is Debbie, my wife," Frederick answered. "We are here to view some houses that we have indicated interest in."

Michelle pulled up a catalog of houses and nodded. "Shall we start with the 4-room flat at 30 Ghim Moh Edge?" she asked.

The couple nodded in unison. Michelle's fingers flew across a keyboard and their surroundings changed once more. This time, they were standing outside a gate to someone's house, a revolving loading wheel barring them from entering. "It takes time to render a whole unit but in the meantime, allow me to talk about this unit. This unit is on a high floor and is exactly," Michelle gave her clients a look-down, a beam of blue light scanning them, "5.17 and 7.94 minutes of walking time to the nearest MRT station respectively!"

"Am I that short?" Debbie muttered under her breath, slightly insulted.

A satisfying click interrupted Michelle's introduction. She ushered them in and true to her word, the whole apartment was loaded, complete with furniture, to the highest resolution. Debbie felt as though she was doing a physical house visit, bumping into the sides of furniture as she manoeuvred her virtual self.

"Is this the current owner's home decor?" Frederick asked Michelle.

"That's right," replied Michelle. "The privacy of the homeowners would not be affected as our algorithm is able to omit their presence."

"Wah," Frederick pointed to the corner of the living room, "so the cat is considered decor?"

The trio's attention shifted to a rendered tortoiseshell cat which had been sitting next to a fragrance

diffuser. If not for it blinking slowly, they would have thought that it was a statue. Without warning, the cat smacked the diffuser. One moment the diffuser was perfectly rendered, the next, it was flickering wildly and eventually showed up on the ground in pieces. The cat opened its mouth in either a bored yawn or a soundless, triumphant meow.

“I shall send this novel bug to Xenia to rectify.” Michelle’s irises flashed red and an envelope embellished with a moth icon whizzed out of the room. It only took a moment for the cat to disappear.

“Wait, it’s fixed?” Frederick asked Michelle.

“Xenia is a self-correcting algorithm, one of the most important assets of Ivory Suites. Once a bug is detected in any of the layers in the architecture, it will work to cascade the fix throughout,” Michelle answered. “In this case, there was an issue with recognising living creatures. Xenia has since updated the laser imaging, detection and ranging (Lidar) system, along with the many rendering rigs we have in place for *maximum* immersiveness.”

“Oh wow. We only use these virtual reality headsets for fun. Like shopping for *virtual* clothing,” Frederick said, nudging Debbie playfully.

Debbie gave Frederick the stink-eye. “You sure know a lot for an agent,” she remarked, changing the topic.

Michelle turned to Debbie with a small smile on her face. “Here at Ivory Suites, we aim to deliver only the best interactive property viewing experiences from the comfort of homes with a human touch. It is my job to be able to answer any questions users may have.”

Michelle made good on her word. Every flat they went to, she spared no detail, going as far as creating a full interior design from an empty floor plan. Yet, the couple always had something to point out. One had a bedroom that directly faced the toilet. “That’s not going to smell nice when either of us does a Number Two,” griped Frederick, drawing out a chuckle from Debbie.

The trio whittled down the list of ten until there was one left. “A 5-room at 290 Bishan Street 24,” announced Michelle as they stepped into their final stop for the day.

It was everything the Yeos had wished for. As Michelle removed the current homeowner’s decor, their vision sprang into the space faster than Michelle could ever load a recommended interior design.

“We can split the largest bedroom into a family space,” Debbie said and Michelle reflected her vision accordingly. “You can have all the space you want for your books in this corner!”

“And You can finally display that huge Lego set without breaking it apart,” said Frederick.

Debbie turned to Michelle, all dizzy from the whirlwind of finally finding their dream home. “How much is it going for? I mean we’ve been to so many—”

“2.3 million dollars,” answered Michelle.

Frederick immediately exhaled through his mouth, puffing out his cheeks. Debbie instinctively placed her hand on her stomach, suddenly finding it hard to catch her breath. “As we approach the 45-minute mark of the consultation, I believe it is an opportune moment to discuss the various loan options and government policies that are in place to support you on your homeownership journey at the Hub,” Michelle said. “To optimise this process, could you provide me with your current monthly incomes?”

“Ten thousand,” answered Frederick. “Combined.”

“Rest assured that there is plenty of support,” Michelle reiterated, nodding emphatically. “I have sent them to your inbox for your perusal. I would be here to answer your queries. Let us head back to the Hub first.”

The lobby, now called the Hub, was busier than when they had left it, with a few more Michelles serving other families. Michelle stood with them, watching on as the Yeos browsed through the volume of information curated for them. A quiet reading was impossible as they could not help but overhear another family's conversation with another Michelle.

“Mr and Mrs Sharma, may I check...”

However, the other Michelle got cut off by Mrs Sharma, who was speaking to someone offscreen. “Rishi! Have you cleaned up the floor? Don't let Bean lick the perfume! RISHI!”

Mr Sharma cleared his throat loudly and Mrs Sharma returned to the conversation, apologising profusely. "May I check if you are here for the penthouse viewing?" the other Michelle repeated.

The Sharmas nodded.

Back in the real world, Debbie tore off her headset. Frederick promptly followed suit. “Are you alright?” he asked.

“I am, I am,” Debbie fibbed, stroking her rotund belly. “The twins were kicking especially hard just now.”

“I thought...” Frederick trailed off and shook his head. "Well, I think we could consider the one at Ghim Moh. It's not too bad.”

“It's alright, we can keep looking,” Debbie said. “I don't mind staying here with your parents for a little while more.”

Frederick took both of Debbie's hands in his. “Thank you, Debs,” he said quietly. “I promise that I'll work even harder.”

Debbie giggled and placed Frederick's hands on her baby bump. "Let them hear it too."

The soon-to-be family of four shared a sweet, contemplative moment, with Frederick's earnest promises to the twins dulling the sharp sting in Debbie's heart.

Out there, their dream home was waiting for them under a sky full of hope.

Meanwhile, their headsets flashed with a notification: **'IVORY SUITES COMMUNICATION PIPE STATUS: DISCONNECTED. PLEASE CONFIRM TERMINATION OF COMMUNICATION.'**