

Kitchen Sink

Mint Kang, 2004

I wrote this story based on a dream I had. Yes, a dream; a complete dream, from the clogged-up sink to the police officers opening fire hysterically. The only singular difference was that I, the narrator, was the one who got stabbed in the dream. But that wouldn't have done for the story.

Brand Ormond didn't deserve what happened to him. He was just this perfectly ordinary guy who worked in some sales firm and did a bit of stage acting on the side. He didn't believe in the supernatural, but he didn't have a problem with it either.

No. It was the supernatural that turned out to have a problem with him, and it wasn't even his fault.

Imagine one of those hideous Japanese horror movies like *Dark Water* or *The Ring*, and think of it happening to *you*. Think of the phone in *your* house ringing and nothing but whining static coming over the line.

Think of *your* nineteen-inch plasma TV lighting up by itself in the middle of the night. And worst of all—think of Sadako, that long-haired ghoul in white from the depths of that well, and imagine her coming out of *your own* TV set. Imagine her crawling over *your* floor, in the middle of *your own* living room. Those horrible nail-less fingers scrabbling at *your* marble or parquet flooring. Think of that in *your own house*.

Brand was in his late twenties and used to come around to my friend Cally's condo apartment to hang out on weekends, because Cally's mum also did some part-time acting and they'd met on a set and gotten along. (It helped that he liked her cooking a lot.) He was always trying to get Cally or me to go on a date with him—neither of us took him that seriously, except when he got a bit fresh and tried to pat us on the bums. Then he usually wound up escaping out the front door with Cally throwing shoes at him.

But no one really minded him. He was pretty harmless.

It happened like this: on Sunday morning one week Brand came

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round to the apartment to hang out as usual. Cally's parents had gone out, and she called me for backup. I arrived about fifteen minutes later and found them in the kitchen. Cally'd had an accident with a lot of corn starch and she was trying to get the sink unclogged before her parents got back and had a fit; Brand wasn't being much help.

"If you don't go away I'll—I'll *plunge* you down the drain!" Cally was threatening when I put my head in.

"Wouldn't fit, dear," Brand said cheerfully, and dodged the plunger. "Oh, hello there, Wai. Come to pick me up for dinner?"

"Get lost, Brand," I said, and went over to look at the sink. It was full of clouded water, with a generous layer of starch covering the bottom. "What did you do, Cally?"

"I dropped the whole container of flour!" Cally wailed. "And when I tried to wash it down it just stuck!"

"Add more," I suggested. "Water, not flour."

"The sink's going to overflow!"

"You could burn incense to the sewer ghost," Brand suggested. He'd watched *Dark Water* on VCD several weeks ago, and hadn't stopped talking about water tanks, taps, slime and sudden pieces of hair since.

"There's no such thing," I said, exasperated.

"You never know, dear. One of them might have migrated from Japan. Why don't you get some joss sticks and pray to her? She might decide to drink the whole mess up for you."

"Very funny!" Cally shouted. "Why don't *you* do it?"

Brand was one of those people who don't know when to leave a joke alone. He went poking into the kitchen cabinets until he found the joss sticks Cally's mother kept around for Qing Ming. And then he lit two of them at the stove burners and started waving them up and down in front of the flooded sink, intoning, "Oh great and powerful ghost of this condominium's almighty sewers, show us your power and clear this blockage—"

Or some rubbish like that. Cally looked as if she was going to hit him at first, then the funny side of it hit her and she started laughing. I joined in, and we leaned on the fridge giggling our heads off.

The attention made Brand worse than ever. He wedged the joss sticks into the starch-clogged drainhole and began to sway about over them,

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chanting strings of nonsense syllables and waving his butt from side to side. The butt waving nearly killed us with laughing. Cally sat down on the floor, clutching the plunger and hyperventilating; I bent double over the kitchen table and hit my head on a thermos flask.

"You girls just love my bum, don't you?" Brand said, stopping his nonsense to give us a big lascivious grin over one shoulder.

At that Cally stopped hyperventilating and jumped up to hit him with the plunger. Brand ducked, slipped and dunked his head right into the sink. He came up spluttering and shaking drops of flour-whitened water everywhere; Cally and me opened our mouths to laugh again; and just then the sink gave a tremendous glooping sound and all the water and starch and the two joss sticks just sucked straight down the drainhole and disappeared.

We stared with our mouths still open. Brand, looking astonished, bent over the sink to see what had happened. And two long, thin, greyish-white hands shot out of the drainhole and grabbed him around the throat.

I think even Brand himself didn't understand what had happened. It was like something out of a horror movie or a bad dream. A pair of hands didn't shoot out of a sink's drainhole in real life, after all. They couldn't.

The hole was only five centimetres across, for god's sake! Then there was at least a metre of curving pipe leading down from under the sink, and after that came all the realities of plumbing and the condo sewage system and pipes less than twenty centimetres in diameter.

And here was the reality of Brand standing bent over the sink and two greyish-white hands clutching him around the throat and squeezing.

He opened his mouth, but no sound came out. We stood at the opposite end of the kitchen and stared. I could see his face turning red, dark red, and his neck seemed to have shrunk in the middle then bloated at the top and bottom. All the flesh of his throat had been pushed up to his chin or down to his collarbones by the grip of those hands.

"Brand?" Cally said faintly. "What's happening?"

She didn't look scared. Neither did he. And I wasn't scared either, not even shocked. Just—surprised. It was a feeling of huge disorientation. As if a dog, perhaps, had started to talk in real life and not just in books or movies.

Brand's face was nearly purple. But he simply went on looking surprised. And then he put out one hand in a vague way and tried to take

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hold of one of the greyish-white wrists.

Before his hand got there it stopped. Not sharply, but in a slow wavering way. Then it just dropped down, and hit the sink, and bounced off and landed on his thigh, where it left a wet mark on his slacks.

The greyish-white hands let go and disappeared back into the sink. Brand stood where he was for another moment. Then he fell over and landed on his back, with his purple face staring at us upside down. His eyes were bulging, and he still looked surprised.

Then Cally screamed. Only it was more of a whispery little whistling sound, like someone blowing into a wind instrument for the first time. She dropped the plunger and turned round and grabbed my arm so hard I found five bruises later. And both of us ran out of the kitchen and skidded to a stop in the middle of the living room, breathing hard enough that we could feel the fast little puffs of each other's exhalations on our faces.

"He's dead!" Cally said in that whispery, whistling little voice.

"We don't know that!" I said, and my own voice was as high and breathy as hers. "He, he might just have—fainted—"

"I can't go back in there!" Cally gasped, clutching at my arm. "Wai, I can't go back there!"

I couldn't either. We backed away across the living room, staring at the door to the kitchen, until we ran into the wall. Then we stood there and went on staring at it.

About fifteen minutes later Cally's parents came back. They piled in through the main door laughing at some joke, and didn't even see us standing beside the wall. Cally's mum disappeared into the master bedroom and Cally's dad headed for his studio and neither of them even looked at the kitchen.

"What are we going to *do*?" Cally said. "How—how do we explain—"

But we didn't need to. As we stood there Brand walked out of the kitchen, and Cally screamed the whispery whistling scream again.

He was slumped forward, and his arms stuck loosely out from his sides and dangled to the front so that he looked like a gorilla. He didn't so much walk as lurch from foot to foot, with a heavy spongy step that, horribly, didn't wobble. And his face was swollen and bulging and a

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terrible blackish-purple colour like the bruising around a broken bone.

I might have screamed as well, but I didn't hear it. I stared at Brand as he shambled slowly across the short open corridor between the kitchen and the living room of Cally's condo apartment, and I thought that if he came up to us with that dull heavy tread and that horrible swollen face I might go mad.

He didn't look at us. He shambled into the little balcony opening off the living room and there he picked up a palette knife, one of the long sharp ones that artists keep around and use for god-knows-what, I'm not even sure they're legal. And then he turned round and started back towards the kitchen with the knife.

"Oh-my-god," Cally whimpered, watching him go. He was making a sound now—not words or anything like that. It was a flat squeezed glottal grunt from the back of his throat: *orr-r-r*.

That sound still comes back to me in my dreams, and when it does I wake up and lie in my bed paralyzed by the sort of terror you think you've outgrown years ago.

We were paralyzed then, Cally and me, standing in the corner of her living room watching Brand Ormond shambling back towards the kitchen with Cally's mum's palette knife in one hand. We stood and stared and clutched each other, and we were still standing and staring and clutching when Cally's dad came out of his studio and walked right into Brand's path.

He stopped and stared. He looked shocked. Then he said: "Brand! What's wrong with you? Your face—"

He didn't say any more, because Brand poked the palette knife out and it went into his stomach. Cally's dad took a sudden step back, and the knife came out with this strange little sucking sound. He took another step to the side, and then he sat down on the floor with a surprised look on his face, almost the way Cally and me had looked in the kitchen. A large blobby patch on the front of his shirt had turned red.

"Dad!" Cally screamed, and ran to him. Her mum came out of the master bedroom and stared with an astounded expression; I thought suddenly that everyone was looking surprised instead of scared, and that was the most wrong part of everything that was happening. Then she started screaming, "Call an ambulance, Cally, quick! Your father's bleeding!"

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Meanwhile Brand went into the kitchen, and suddenly there was a clashing, clanging sound. I went after him, and he was standing over the sink and hacking and stabbing at the drainhole with the palette knife.

He was still hacking at the sink when the police and the ambulance arrived, about ten minutes later. Two officers pulled me out of the way and told me to go and join Cally and her family outside for my own safety.

I went as far as the living room and stopped; from the kitchen I could hear the two officers shouting at Brand to drop his weapon and raise his hands. Then I sat down on the sofa and started giggling into a cushion, and I couldn't stop giggling even when a struggle broke out, one of the officers screamed and suddenly three or four shots were fired.

A second ambulance had to be sent for the police officer Brand stabbed when they tried to pull him away from the sink and disarm him by force. The guy wound up sharing it with Brand's body en route to the morgue—his junior partner had panicked and shot Brand in the chest three times and once in the head. I never found out whether that officer got reprimanded for using excessive force.

The medical officer in that second ambulance pronounced Brand dead on the spot, at 2:07 pm. Cause of death: gunshot wounds to head and chest. Nothing was mentioned about strangulation, and when I shoved past them to snatch a glimpse of the body before it was covered, there weren't any marks on Brand's neck, none at all, although his face was still purple and swollen and so horrible close up that I actually threw up on the spot.

The medical officer gave me an injection after that, I think as much to keep me out of his way as to calm me down. It made things a bit fuzzy, but I remember hearing him saying a short while later that those were the strangest gunshot wounds he'd ever seen, there was no circulatory spurt, and he couldn't imagine why the man's face looked like that.

I never studied medicine. But if that officer had happened to ask my opinion, I'd have told him why. Brand Ormond had already been dead for nearly half an hour before the junior police officer shot him, and he had been strangled to death.

Cally's family moved about a week later. I heard that after they left, the condo management sent a plumber around to check on the pipes as a

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matter of course, and he happened to open the kitchen sink trap—that little U-bend that collects all the dirt so it won't go down into the pipes and choke them up.

He found the usual dirt and grease and rubbish and bits of hair in it; and he also found two small, oddly shaped bones. Ordinarily he wouldn't have taken any notice of them, but he'd heard about what had happened in this kitchen. He took the bones to a doctor he knew, who identified them as having come from a human hand.

The owner of the hand was never found; but the condo management took the two bones and had them cremated, then placed in the Mandai columbarium, in an unmarked niche.

But the apartment still hasn't been resold.

This story was initially titled It Goes Around, but I realized that that sounded too much like karma - as if Brand had done something to deserve his grotesque fate. So I changed its title to the thing that caused all the trouble: the kitchen sink.

Don't you want to go check your own sink trap now?