

# The Wedding Runner

*Mint Kang, 2009*

*This story was conceived from a dream about - what else - running away from something. The ghost dimension is an old concept of mine, inspired by Chinese superstition, and in fact most of this story's background is drawn from Chinese superstition in the form of Hong Kong ghostbuster movies. It takes some liberties, but what's fiction without liberties?*

The bride was coming down the stairs. Looking in through the glass doors, I could see the red carpet and the double row of girls strewing flower petals. Music was playing—some cheap Mando-pop song, probably the groom's favourite. The tune was bland, and I wondered if the bride liked it.

"Ready?" Johnson said beside me.

"Lousy music," I replied. I could see the front edge of the bride's gown, a traditional bell-skirted monstrosity of stiff white lace. Another step brought her into view, her face a mask of pancake make-up as stiff as the gown. Her veil was raised, and even under the layers of powder, rouge and eyeshadow I could see she was terrified. Clasped in her white-gloved hands were three long, smouldering joss sticks, their fine ash sifting over the lace of her skirt.

"Here comes the groom, skinny as a broom," Johnson murmured, and I snorted back a laugh. The groom effigy did look very much like a broom beside the bride's enormous gown. As the happy couple drew closer to the doors, the puppeteers became visible, sidling along at an angle and gingerly manipulating the long rods which controlled the groom's cardboard limbs. Some people went for a three-dimensional model and dressed it up in the actual wedding suit, but the bride's parents hadn't been able to afford that. Today's groom was a two-dee cutout of a pre-nuptial photograph, blown up to life-size and rather grainy. A miniature bouquet was glued to its lapel.

The ushers had taken up position by the doors, ready to swing them open. I shifted my weight, feeling the familiar tension begin in the pit of my stomach. Every time I did a wedding run, I had indigestion for the next three days. Not that I minded. Indigestion proved I was still alive.

The bride and groom had reached the doors. The ushers swung them open, and the bland pop music suddenly became clearer. It didn't sound any better.

# The Wedding Runner

*Mint Kang, 2009*

I fell in beside the bride as she came rustling over the threshold, walking in perfect step with her and sneaking sidewise looks to make sure she wasn't going to faint or drop the joss sticks. Her hands were shaking.

"Stand by," Johnson muttered as we went down the three steps to the driveway. "Stand by!" and I could tell he was saying it automatically, like a nervous reflex.

Any time now. I could feel my own breathing quicken, my pupils dilating so that everything became as clear and bright as the idiotic bland song still pouring out through the doorway. Beyond the gates I could see the wedding car standing in the road, bedecked with ribbons and flowers, the doors wide open.

We cleared the driveway, the bride rustling, the groom effigy creaking. Six steps to the car. I said a few swear words in the quivering silence of my head. Some runners liked starting off from a moving car—they claimed it gave them a kick start—but I hated it. The momentum was too hard to absorb, and there was a terrible risk of losing your balance and falling down.

In this business, when you fall down you don't get up.

"Stand by, stand by," Johnson was repeating under his breath. "Stand by—*here it comes*—"

The sunlight dimmed. A deathly silence fell. And then the world warped around the bride and groom, stretched and parted like a maw to form a ragged grey gap whose edges fluttered in a spectral wind. Time elongated; everything other than that flickering movement slowed to a crawl. The flower girls scattered in slow motion, the spilled petals from their baskets sinking to the ground as if through thick glue; the puppeteers dropped their rods and bolted for safety in long, dreamlike, balletic leaps. And just as ponderously, as if he were performing some slow taiji move, Johnson grabbed the bride around the waist and lifted her out of the gap, the joss sticks spilling from her fingers.

I reached out, my hand feeling the quickness of the motion but my eyes seeing it at quarter speed—a strange disconnect, and then the joss sticks were firmly in my grasp and I fell into the greyness in the bride's place. Through the fluttering edges, I had a last glimpse of Johnson trying to disentangle himself from her train. Then the ghost dimension closed around me.

# The Wedding Runner

*Mint Kang, 2009*

Why do people do stupid things? You might as well ask why people are people. The scientists and the mystics went on television to warn everyone about the danger. The churches and the temples preached against it. In the end, even the government stepped in and issued official advisories: to schools, workplaces, unions, societies, everywhere people were likely to meet and fall in love, or at least in lust. Flyers in mailboxes, posters at bus stops, radio broadcasts, e-mail circulars, everything.

And still the wedding runners do good business, because people are people.

It's mostly the younger set these days. Older people have more perspective. Well, mostly. We still get calls from middle-aged clients—frightened women whose loneliness pushed them into first an unsuitable love match and then a deadly promise, fearful men who made their vows to please their mistresses without thinking about the consequences.

The worst our firm ever handled, though, was a twelve-year-old girl. Her school counsellor put her parents in touch with us. Twelve years old! Why would a twelve-year-old-girl take the Heaven-Earth-Underworld pledge? *Why?*

And after we finished asking that, we asked: what happened to the boy she took it with?

The parents refused to give the story. We threatened not to take the case. They counter-threatened to sue for deliberately endangering the life of a minor. Johnson called a lawyer friend of his. There were words, a lot of nasty words, and finally the counsellor coughed up the details. The boy was seventeen and from a top school. He got her pregnant, her parents made a police report. He was charged with statutory rape. The day before he was scheduled to appear in court, he went up to the twenty-first floor and jumped.

We flipped a coin for the wedding and the other girl runner, Chanice, lost. Later she told me that all through the whole thing, she couldn't look the bride or the parents in the eye.

The stupid things that people *do*.

# The Wedding Runner

*Mint Kang, 2009*

I ran down the street, the joss sticks trailing fragrant smoke from my right hand. Nothing else moved; the thump of my cross-trainers on the road and the pant of my breath were the only sounds. Overhead was a grey, sunless, cloudless sky. The road was grey. The houses to either side were grey. Behind me, the wedding car stood, doors open, in the driveway. It was grey too. There is no colour, no motion, no sound in the ghost dimension. There are no *people* in the ghost dimension.

Except the wedding runners, like me.

The trees bordering the road were grey and cast no shadow. The grass under them was grey too, and artificial-looking. Running through the empty, silent replica of the living world, I wondered: if I touched those trees, that grass, would they melt away and show me what really lies beneath? It was a question I asked every now and then, and it was always followed by another question: did I really want to know what lay beneath the monochrome façade of the ghost dimension?

And as I thought that, I heard it behind me. A sound like wind wailing through small openings, but there was no wind here. A sound like voices screaming, but there was no one here to scream except me. I'd heard that sound a dozen times since I started as a wedding runner, but it never failed to make my flesh crawl and my bladder want to let go.

I looked back without breaking stride. The myths all say that looking back will get you killed, like Lot's wife, but in reality looking back is quite harmless. What does get you killed is slowing or stumbling because of what you see.

I saw a mass of fog, like haze from Sumatra on a bad day. It was paler grey than the surroundings and it rolled down the road towards me at the speed of a running man. Its edges coiled and moved like tentacles. And the high, choral, windy screaming came from somewhere inside it.

Most wedding runners see the fog. A few have the bad luck to see the deceased bride or groom—and those few don't stay in the business for long. Running for your life through the ghost dimension is bad enough.

Running for your life, through the ghost dimension, from an angry reanimated corpse? People can only take so much of that and stay sane.

I moved my eyes back to the grey road and kept running. Ash from the joss sticks spattered the back of my hand, stinging slightly. The corner came up ahead and I turned onto a grey artificial-looking replica of the

# The Wedding Runner

Mint Kang, 2009

main road, trees and grass frozen in time, not a car or a bird or a person in sight. The joss sticks in my hand were about a fifth of the way down. I would be trapped in the ghost dimension for as long as they were burning, which wasn't really all that long. We used special joss sticks, custom-made to burn down into nothing in less than half an hour. All I had to do was outrun the fog until the sticks were gone, and then the Heaven-Earth-Underworld pledge would be null and void, I would be released back into the real world and the bride back there would be safe.

On the other hand, if the joss sticks went out without burning all the way down, I'd never leave the ghost dimension. Except as a ghost myself.

I looked back again. The fog rolled onwards, about a hundred and fifty metres behind me. The scream from within it never altered in volume or pitch, and if I listened carefully there were words—muffled, unintelligible and mindless.

I didn't try to listen. I concentrated on keeping my pace steady and my breathing even, maintaining the hundred-and-fifty-metre lead. It was like any other run I'd made: a test of composure, not of speed or stamina.

Keeping my nerve was all that mattered, staying calm enough to judge my speed and my pursuer's speed and the rate at which the joss sticks were burning.

I paced myself down the middle of the road, angling the joss sticks so they wouldn't catch too much wind and go out, glancing back now and then to make sure my lead was secure. And I thought about the Heaven-Earth-Underworld pledge.

Like so much idiocy nowadays, it had started on the Internet. No one was really sure when, or who came up with it. It was just a modified extension of the traditional Chinese wedding ceremony, which involved the bride and groom paying their respects to heaven and earth. This version involved an engaged couple paying their respects to heaven, earth *and the underworld*—and then swearing with the underworld as witness that death would not part them.

It sounded like a harmless, romantic version of till-death-do-us-part. It still sounds harmless. And for some reason, it caught on. People loved it. They did it all over the place, no matter what their race or religion was. Pictures of couples going through the pledge, some with full ceremonial trappings, became commonplace on social networking websites.

# The Wedding Runner

*Mint Kang, 2009*

People loved it. They saw it as a harmless fad. But the underworld took it seriously. Seriously enough to come and collect the surviving half of any couple who'd taken the pledge and then been broken up by the death, whether accidental or deliberate, of one partner.

It took a while for people to believe what was happening, and longer for them to accept that it was real. Then there was an uproar and a manhunt for the original culprit who'd started the fad. Warnings and bans were passed, and governments, religious groups and cultural groups got into tussles over how to deal with it.

And meanwhile, someone found out that the ghost dimension was most likely to open up during a mock wedding held between the living and dead halves of the couple. Someone else worked out the trick with the joss sticks and yet someone else came up with the idea of having a proxy pass through the ghost dimension in the bride or groom's place. It wasn't long before the wedding runners were in business.

I ran past an empty bus stop, under a two-dimensional overhead bridge, through a junction whose lights were grey and vacant as the sky above me. The joss sticks were halfway down and I still wasn't breathing hard; my lead was secure, and the continuous high scream behind me wasn't bothering me. I'd never had any trouble tuning it out, not even on my first run. There were other things to listen to, like my own breath, the rustle of my loose clothing, the thump of my feet on the road surface that wasn't exactly asphalt.

And, to my left, a rustle that wasn't from my clothes.

My legs continued to move, but my breath stopped and so, it seemed, did my heart. There wasn't supposed to be anything moving in the ghost dimension but me and the cloud pursuing me.

Rustle. In time with my steps. My feet had gone cold inside my cross-trainers. Hot ash fell on my right wrist, and I hardly felt it.

Chanice had asked me the Big Why after my second run: with all the professions in the world to choose from, *why* did I decide to become a wedding runner? She herself had lost her younger brother to the Heaven-Earth-Underworld pledge; going into the running business was her way of atoning for not saving him. But I had no siblings, no one close to me had

# The Wedding Runner

*Mint Kang, 2009*

taken the vows, and right up until the day I walked into Johnson's office, I'd never even seen a wedding runner in person. I'd signed on in a fit of reckless randomness: I was a fast runner, I wasn't afraid of the supernatural and back then, almost three years ago, I'd believed that I was immortal and nothing as straightforward as the ghost dimension would ever kill me.

I didn't feel immortal any more. My face had gone cold too, and the inside of my mouth was dry like sandpaper.

Without breaking stride, I turned my head and looked to the left.

A small head bobbed up and down at my elbow. It was the head of a papier-mache mannequin, shaped from scraps of paper pasted together into a balloon oval, and it topped a child-sized papier-mache body that ran along beside me with little scuffling, rustling sounds.

The scraps of paper forming the head and body were rectangular and coarse, slightly yellowish, with gold and silver squares in the centre. Joss paper. Also known as ghost money.

You don't need special training to be a wedding runner. You don't even need to be able to run. All you need to do is hold the joss sticks when the ghost dimension opens up.

There's a story that once, during a mock wedding, the runner who was supposed to take the groom's place slipped and fell. He dropped the joss sticks, and the rift opened for the groom.

Except that the groom's nine-year-old brother caught the joss sticks before they hit the ground, and jumped into the rift instead.

That little boy never came out of the ghost dimension. Wedding runner legend says that he's still in there, wandering the grey roads of the ghost dimension, waiting for another runner to come and rescue him.

The story doesn't mention his name. So wedding runners call him the Little Brother, and during the seventh lunar month we burn a few pieces of joss paper for him.

# The Wedding Runner

*Mint Kang, 2009*

I only realized I was screaming after several minutes had passed—screaming and running as fast as I could, the joss sticks and the fog forgotten, just screaming and running and trying to get away from that small papier-mache figure that scurried along beside me, reaching for the hem of my shirt with spidery fingers that were stiffly outlined in scraps of joss paper.

The spidery fingers found their mark. I felt a tug on my shirt, and the next scream that left my throat echoed off the flat grey surroundings.

Then my breath tangled into a tight knot in my chest and I couldn't scream any more. I plunged onwards, but now my legs seemed to be moving through glue and a heavy weight was dragging me backwards.

Another papery little hand closed around my left wrist. I could feel my eyes trying to bulge out of my head and my mouth trying uselessly to produce another scream. But even in the middle of the panic, I remembered what to do. We all carried little black emergency pouches on runs, made up at temples or churches and blessed by priests or mediums.

I reached into the pouch with the thumb and index fingers of my free hand, still clutching the joss sticks with the other fingers. More hot ash fell over my hand. I saw it but didn't feel it. My fingers were numb; the folded triangle of yellow paper nearly slipped out of my grip before it unfurled, vermilion calligraphy splashing the names of three deities across square black seals of exorcism.

I skidded to a halt, the talisman fluttering from my hand, and reached it towards the little papier-mache figure that clung so heavily to my left arm. "Let go," I croaked, the words leaving my mouth in a half-audible gasp. "I can't do anything for you. Let me go!"

The papery grip did not slacken. The weight continued to drag me downwards, as if all my limbs had become three times as heavy. Distantly, I could hear the high choral scream of the fog approaching. I had completely outdistanced it in my panic, but it would catch up soon.

"I'm sorry, Little Brother," I gasped, and slapped the talisman onto the small joss paper-covered head.

A tiny sizzling jolt went through my numb fingers and up my arm. The dragging weight faded away as if I had dreamed it, and the thin papery hands clutching me suddenly let go. I staggered several steps forward, turning as I caught myself, and saw the little papier-mache figure frozen in

# The Wedding Runner

*Mint Kang, 2009*

place with the talisman hanging down from its forehead.

I didn't know how long the talisman would hold it there, and I didn't know how long I had before the screaming fog caught up with me. So I took a firmer grip on the joss sticks and ran again, breathing hard now, my throat raw and my chest aching. I ran, I kept running, and at some point the joss sticks burned down to a handful of ash that left a blister on my palm and the greyness around me dissolved into the moving light and colour and beautiful, blessed fresh air of the real living world.

I was running along Bukit Timah Road, nearly eight kilometres from where I'd started, and my legs hurt. I'd never run so far in such a short time before. But then I'd never run in blind screaming panic before, either. My right hand hurt where the ash had burned me, and my left forearm hurt as well—in the shape of what I now saw were five little bruises, deep and dark red. Four thin fingers and a small thumb.

I slowed and stopped, my legs shaking. Then I sat down on the curb, pulled out my mobile phone with fingers that were still cold and numb, and called Johnson. "Bukit Timah Road near Sixth Avenue, same side. Hurry up."

Johnson's big car drove up ten minutes later. Instead of getting in, I pointed to the boot and went around when he unlocked it. The interior was crammed with cartons of joss sticks, bundles of joss paper and hell money, boxes of talismans from various religions, small effigies of Taoist deities and a great many paper offerings.

I scabbled around in the paper offerings until I found representations of a PSP, a basketball, a bicycle—things a nine-year-old boy might have wanted. I piled them up on the footpath with a stack of joss papers. There was a fine for not burning incense or offerings in proper containers, but I was too shaken to care right now.

Johnson joined me and added a set of boy's clothing to the pile. He handed me a lighter, and I set fire to the paper. There was no wind and the smoke went straight up in the air.

"These are for you, Little Brother," I said over the crackling of the flames. "I'm sorry I used the talisman on you. I'm sorry I couldn't help you. Please be kind to us in future. We're all trying to save people just like you saved your own brother."

When the offerings were all gone, I scraped the ash off the path with

# The Wedding Runner

*Mint Kang, 2009*

the side of my shoe. There was a big scorch mark left on the cement, but that couldn't be helped. Then I got in the car with Johnson. He got a can of Coke from behind the driver's seat and handed it to me.

"Bride's father gave us a good red packet," he said as he started the car. "I haven't counted yet, looks like eight hundred plus."

"Donate some to the temple," I said after the Coke had soothed my raw throat enough to speak. When he raised an eyebrow I pointed to the emergency pouch, wordlessly indicating the talisman that had saved my life.

"Out of your share," Johnson said, and grinned.

I grinned back. He was only joking, but I wouldn't have minded if he'd taken it out of my pay. Business was business, even the wedding runner business.