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*Shimmer*

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# Something Wicked This Way Plumbs

By Vylar Kaftan

**Oh, the watercooler jug?** Yeah, I get some questions about that. Not a lot of visitors here in my office, but most people notice it right away. It reminds me how important plumbing skills are. Never know when they'll save Halloween. Or your life.

It happened last year. I'd come into the office early, because I was on deadline—and a month behind on bills. To make things worse, my girlfriend had the flu, and I'd promised to be there by five to take her boys trick-or-treating. So here I was in the men's restroom, at 7:30 on Halloween morning. I

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piñata.*

shook out a few drops, zipped my pants, and went to the sink. It's one of those two-faucet deals with handles on each side and a wide central spigot. I turned the cold water tap.

Candy streamed out of the faucet like the entrails of a slaughtered piñata. The sink filled with Skittles, candy corn, and jelly beans. They rattled against each other as they spilled over the basin's edge. Startled, I turned the faucet off.

I hoped someone was playing a Halloween prank, because the alternative was disturbing. Or maybe I wasn't awake yet. I glanced at the mirror. In dreams you've always got weird things about your face, like snakes crawling from your eyeballs. But I looked normal. A bit scruffy, and my sleepy eyes were bloodshot. Neither of these were a problem for a freelance writer—in some circles, they might count as street cred. I looked at the sink. Still candy.

I went to my office for a paper bag.

My office is a closet in a small San Francisco office complex. I rent it as a workplace away from my noisy roommate. I share the complex with a dental office, a massage therapist named Dana, and an unnaturally

large ficus tree. Dana says it's a spirit tree and it brings harmony to her work. She re-pots it every year, which encourages its monstrous tendencies.

I found a bag and emptied the recycled newspapers. I checked Dana's door, but she wasn't in yet. I took my bag to the restroom. As I scooped up the candy, I noticed it was slimy and smelled like algae. I turned a jelly bean over in my hands, looking at the green streaks. I supposed whoever set up this prank hadn't cleaned the pipes first—how *had* they done this, anyway? I certainly wasn't planning to eat any of it. Basic Halloween safety: don't eat razorblades or unwrapped candy. Especially from a faucet.

The thought reminded me: there were two handles. I turned the hot water tap. Nothing.

I lugged the candy back to my office, uncertain what to do with it. Maybe I could take it to the preschool next door—but after I made my deadline. To my surprise, Dana was fiddling with her office key. She was having trouble keeping it level—the dozen-odd keychains dragged it down.

"Morning, Dana," I said. "Hey, you've got to come see this."

“Gary! Hiya!” she called out, finally unlocking her door and dropping her keys in the process. “You’re here awful early. Happy sowwin.”

“What?”

“Sowwin. Spelled Sam-hain,” she said, as if the syllables were actually the twenty-seventh and twenty-eighth letters of the alphabet. “Day of the Dead. Wiccan New Year.”

“Oh! Well, happy New Year,” I said. “I didn’t know you got here this early.”

“Yoga. What’s up?”

“Come check out the sink.”

She followed me to the restroom. I like Dana—she reminds me of my kid half-sister. She’s always cheerful and knows everything about the Bay Area. Sometimes she brings me lunch when I’m on a tough deadline. When she’s excited about something, she waves her hands around like they’re talking to the air.

When I turned on the tap, she waved her hands around and squeaked with delight. “That’s completely freakin’ awesome! Did you do this?”

“No, but I’m trying to figure out who did.”

“Someone in the dentist’s office?”

“All this sugar? Not likely.”

Dana picked up a handful. “And the high-fructose corn syrup, and saturated fats, and—ugh. I can’t believe how much of this stuff I used to eat as a kid. It’s probably still inside me somewhere with all the gum I swallowed. I bet my guts could caulk a leaky pipe.”

“It’s a great prank. I hope it doesn’t mess up the plumbing.”

“Do you think it will?”

I squinted at the tap, trying to visualize what was behind it. It bothered me. I couldn’t figure out how someone rigged the pipes. Was it something inside the faucet, or deeper in the system? How could they have separated the pipe from the rest of the plumbing? And where was this candy stored? There was an awful lot of candy—a grocery-bag full, so far. I pictured someone hooking the pipes to an oversized vending machine while the water heater built up pressure. The resulting image was straight from Saturday morning cartoons. “We’d better call the water company.”

Dana followed me back to my office. I looked up the number and called on speakerphone. A pleasant

voice said, "Please remain on the line and an operator will assist you shortly."

"Awesome," said Dana.

Then the music started.

It wasn't bad at first. An elevator version of some classic song I should know. Dana leaned against the doorframe, and I straightened my desk. After a few minutes, Dana wandered off. I looked over my project notes, then stared at the wall and daydreamed of skiing.

The music continued, like a retired couple on vacation who'd forgotten where they were going. I shook my head, glancing at the time. I'd been zoning for half an hour. I opened my document and started writing. As a technical writer, I took whatever job I could get—but my specialty was instruction manuals. Today I was writing documentation for the Wrap-o-Matic, an industrial-weight shrink-wrapper for use in factories.

Shakespeare it ain't.

I got some work done. Actually, I forgot I was still on hold. Several hours passed before I glanced out my door. The dentist's office was lit and active. Dana was nowhere in sight.

I got up to look for her, but just then a girl answered the phone. “Thank you for calling—we apologize for any delay. How can I help you?”

“Hi. There’s candy in the plumbing.”

“May I have your name, date of birth, Social Security number, mother’s maiden name, address of residence, and sun sign?”

“What?”

“Just kidding about the sun sign, sir.”

“Um. I just work here.”

“So do I, sir.”

Ten minutes later, I’d concluded the following: 1) the water company refused to talk to anyone except the building’s owner, who was on vacation this week, 2) no amount of pleading, demanding, or cajoling would influence them, and 3) the statement “We appreciate your business” can be delivered with malice, like the final knife into Caesar’s unsuspecting ribs. Et tu, water company.

I went into Dana’s office. The room smelled like exotic spices, and meditation chimes played on the stereo. Dana was rummaging around her purse. “No dice,” I said. “We’re on our own.”

“Crap.” She dug out some Chapstick and used it. “Well, it’s probably okay. I mean, anyone clever enough to rig the plumbing probably knows what they’re doing.”

“I don’t know,” I said, remembering the slimy candy. “I have a bad feeling about this. Dana, what’s that in the corner?”

She glanced at the giant clay bowl. “Oh. It’s a new pot for Krishna.”

“Who?”

“The ficus.”

“The tree is already filling most of the lobby, and you want it to get bigger?”

“He needs room to grow,” she said. “He’s a free-range ficus.”

Just then, Vivian burst through the door. She’s the receptionist for the dental office. We trade books sometimes, since our reading tastes overlap. Vivian chain-smokes, but her teeth are disturbingly white. I figure she works there to pay for her habit, much like a bookstore employee. “Both of you. You’ve *got* to see what’s happening in the men’s restroom.”

We went, although we knew.

Vivian turned the tap. Clearly, she'd been here a while, piling candy against the wall. "Candy," she announced unnecessarily, "is coming out of the cold water faucet."

"We know," said Dana. "It's a prank. Why were you in the men's restroom?"

"The ladies' room was occupied."

"Well, still—"

"They are single-occupant restrooms, identical in all ways," Vivian said, giving Dana a look.

Dana was looking at the sink. "Hey, what happens when you turn the hot water on?"

"I tried it," I said. "Nothing."

"I tried it too," said Vivian, with a sniff. "I was hoping for airline liquor bottles."

Dana said, "You'd think we would have attracted some children by now. Like ants to sugar."

"I'm glad there aren't any here," I said, thinking of my nieces. Their Halloween candy rarely lasted more than a night. "They'd eat themselves sick."

"Agreed," said Vivian.

I studied the faucet, which had developed an

M&M drip. Curious, I poked a finger inside. A green tentacle slithered out and wrapped around my wrist.

Dana screamed. Vivian gasped and backed off. I wrenched my arm away, hard. The tentacle stretched with me. I grabbed it with my other hand and yanked. The tentacle twanged like a sickly banjo. I pulled my wrist free—and it wrapped around my other arm.

It was like playing Chinese handcuffs with an octopus. I didn't want to get both hands caught, so I dragged the tentacle down and stomped on it. It quivered, then released me. It withdrew into the faucet, leaving a green trail. An eyestalk poked out. It rotated, blinking a greenish membrane over a dark orb, and then vanished. The M&Ms kept dripping.

Adrenaline raced through me. Dana had a hand over her heart. Vivian was staring at me. "Gary," she said. "Did you see—"

"This sink is coming open. Right now," I said grimly.

"What was it?"

"Not human. I'll be right back."

"Liquor bottles. We need them," said Vivian shakily.

I keep a spare set of tools in my car. I figured I could unscrew the sink drain and take a look. I didn't know exactly what to do once I was in there. But it felt better than doing nothing.

I was sure, after touching it. Nothing fake felt that way. The clammy touch, the slight hairiness, the way it throbbed—but more importantly, I had *sensed* something there. Alive. It was thinking, and breathing—and it wanted something. I don't know how I got all that. Some sort of chemical or pheromone, I guessed. A communication pattern more primal than words. Or maybe it had telepathy. Nothing could explain how I knew this—nothing in my experience at all.

I should have been more frightened. I think the adrenaline kicked me into overdrive. It made a certain sense: This can't be happening—therefore, it can't hurt me. A nice, logical reason. Probably something like what General Custer thought just before his last stand.

Anyway, when I got back, Dana was piling candy in the corner. Vivian was blowing cigarette smoke out the open window. She wasn't supposed to smoke inside, but even Dana didn't say anything.



*Lovecraftian horrors*

I unscrewed the S-pipe from the sink bottom and removed the connecting framework. I peered into darkness. Dana helpfully offered a blinking purple mini-flashlight.

“Sorry,” said Dana, “but it’s better than nothing.”

“Lovecraft,” said Vivian, out of nowhere.

“What?” I asked.

“Lovecraftian horrors. Tentacles. Old Ones from beyond.”

“I doubt it,” I said, then paused. I remembered the sense I’d gotten when it touched me. Impossible—but it was real. This was no prank. I stared into the darkness of the pipes, lit off-and-on with Dana’s flashlight.

“Horrors. It’s Halloween,” insisted Vivian.

“The veil between worlds is thin,” Dana said. “A time not a time, and a place not a place—”

“Exactly,” said Vivian.

I prodded inside the pipe with a screwdriver, wishing I had a plumber’s snake. “I think aliens are more likely.” Chalk one up on the Board of Improbable Things I’ve said in my life.

“Why?”

"Because I don't believe in magic," I said.

Dana shrugged. "I don't believe in freeways."

Vivian blew out a long smoky breath, then stubbed out her cigarette on the window. "Why aliens?"

"Well, assuming that it's not human—and that it's sentient, which—well, just say it is. Aliens are unlikely, sure. But not *impossible*, like magic and monsters and so forth. And this thing—well, I don't know. Prehensile tentacles have evolutionary advantages, especially in water. Look at the cephalopod family—"

"Like Cthulhu," said Vivian. "Look. Let's vote."

"Vote?" I asked.

"Aliens, or horrors from beyond."

"What good does a vote do?" asked Dana.

"It keeps us from panicking. Vote! All for horrors, raise your hand!" She raised hers. "All for aliens, raise your hand!" I raised mine, reluctantly.

Both of us looked at Dana. "Science fiction is *not* going to ruin my Samhain," she said. "I'll call a plumber."

When she left, Vivian lit another cigarette. "Gary, I'm worried," she said.

“That thing is strong,” I said. “At least we’re adults here. I’d be worried that it’d break a kid’s neck, if there were any around.”

We stared at each other, both realizing the same thing.

“The candy,” I said.

“It’s bait. The monster is baiting—”

“Fishing for kids.”

“Gary, we’re hosting trick-or-treating.”

“What?”

“In the dental office. Alternative trick-or-treating. We’re giving them stickers and toothbrushes. The preschool kids are coming over this afternoon.”

“We’ve got to keep them away from here.”

“I can’t—I have to go back to work.”

“Well, so do I,” I said. “Maybe Dana will do it.”

Dana was on hold when I checked, but she said she had clients all afternoon and she couldn’t cancel them. That left me—and my laptop. I sighed. I took my power supply and sat on the toilet, fully clothed. I worked on my instruction manual again. Occasionally, I glanced at the sink and the hole below it, half-expecting a tentacle to snake towards my ankle.

At one point I coughed, and a single Gummi bear shot out from the hole. It lay on the ground like a shiny treasure. “Nuh-uh,” I said. “You’re not fooling me.” I was getting hungry, but luckily Dana knocked on the door and handed me a baloney sandwich. After I ate it, I felt better. I focused on work, hoping I’d be done by mid-afternoon.

Well, I would’ve been. Except I was writing on a toilet. Even clothed, the pose inspired my body’s basic needs. I glanced at the sink. I didn’t like the idea of pulling down my pants near free-flying tentacles.

I poked my head out the door. Small ghosts, witches, and cartoon characters filed through the dentist’s office, emerging with plastic baggies that disappointed them when they looked inside.

One of Dana’s clients was just leaving. I knocked on her door. “Hey, Gary,” she said. “No plumber. They’re booked for today, unless you have five hundred bucks handy.”

“Dana, come guard the restroom for a few minutes.”

“Why?”

“I need to use it. The other one.”

Dana's brow furrowed, then she grinned. "Okay! I'll be right there."

The phrase "right there" for Dana meant a five-minute stop at the ficus tree. She petted its branches and murmured something. I got a cup from the nearly-empty watercooler and drank some water. Dana was still talking to the tree. "Dana," I said, "can't this wait?"

"It won't take long," she said. "Krishna likes attention at three o'clock."

I sighed. A small child wandered by, looking mournful. He tossed a toothbrush in the garbage.

When Dana was done, we went to the restrooms. She stood by the men's room while I used the women's. I tested the sink before doing my business. Afterward, as I washed my hands, I heard a shriek. I rushed out. Dana was pressed against the restroom door, mobbed by excited children.

"What is it? What's going on?" I asked.

"They found it," she shouted over the noise.

"You were supposed to be guarding it!"

"Well, this one kid was crying that he would wet his pants, so..."

“Oh my God,” I said. “Dana, we’ve got to stop them!”

“I’m trying!” she said. She was drowning in a sea of preschoolers. Their teachers tried to restrain them, but it was like pulling water back from the falls. Dana and I looked at each other, panicking. On inspiration, I ran to her office and grabbed the heavy ceramic pot. I forced my way through the kids and plunked it down.

“That’ll do it,” I said. The preschoolers tugged on the door handle, but couldn’t move the giant pot. Dana and I escaped to my office.

My voicemail was blinking. Thinking it might be the water company, I picked it up. Instead, I heard my girlfriend’s croaking voice. “Hi, honey—I feel awful. I guess you’re working. The neighbors said there was a trick-or-treat thing at the dentist’s office in your building, so they took the boys over. They should be there any minute. I love you. I’m going to go die now.”

I ended the call, shaken. It was bad enough to think of an alien eating random preschoolers. But my girlfriend’s kids, here at risk—

“No,” I said out loud. “I won’t let it.”

“What do we do?” asked Dana.

Vivian stuck her head through the door. “Gary,” she said, “we’ve got to do something.”

I said, “We’ve got to investigate the plumbing. Someone needs to get into maintenance and figure out what’s going on.”

Both women looked at me. Had there been crickets, they would have chirped. “I would like to know why,” I said, “in the face of equal incompetence, men are always expected to deal with the plumbing.”

“I just did my nails,” said Vivian.

“I’m too young to die,” said Dana.

I sighed. “Fine. That’s fine.” I put on my jacket. My adrenaline must have kicked in again, because secretly I liked the idea of being a hero. Preferably not a dead one. “The maintenance door is outside in the back, right? I think I saw it there.”

“Yeah,” said Dana, “I’ll show you.”

Vivian said, “I’ll take care of these kids.”

Dana and I went out the back door. Behind us, we heard Vivian proclaim, “Children! You’ll get candy later. But first, I’ll tell you a Halloween story. A chilling tale, full of tiny monsters called bacteria—”

“That one,” said Dana, pointing at an unmarked door. “Maintenance.”

It was locked, of course. “Crap,” I said. “Got a fire axe?”

“I don’t think so. Although—ooh! Hang on.”

Dana ran inside. She returned with a sheathed dagger. I blinked. She unsheathed it and traced an imaginary doorframe around the real one. I half-expected the door to explode in a smoky mess, but instead she worked the dagger’s tip into the lock. Dana wiggled it until the lock broke. She pushed the door open.

Dana sheathed the dagger and saw me staring at her. “An athame,” she told me. “Ceremonial dagger for tonight’s Samhain ritual.”

“Where’d you learn that trick?” I asked.

“My boyfriend’s from Oakland,” she said. “He taught me some things. Switchblade, athame, they kinda work the same. I’ll wait here. I got your back.”

Simultaneously, I felt safer and more frightened.

Maintenance was dark. I walked in, groping for a light switch. My hand connected and light flooded the room. I wasn’t an expert plumber, but I knew the

basics. I found the water heater and the water main right away. That weird sense of something alien was stronger here.

The room doubled as a storage area, with boxes, crates, and extra watercooler jugs. Nearby, a shelf above the reserve tank held more tools, including a shut-off wrench. I studied the plumbing. Probably was upstream of the water heater, where there was more space. I examined the main—a large red elbow with valves at both ends. The creature was inside. I could feel it.

Something probed at my mind, wondering who and what I was. I couldn't understand it in words. The closest I got were concepts: "too big" and "not edible." It was comforting.

"Hi," I whispered. Then I thought at it, hoping it could understand me. *Who are you? What do you want?*

A baloney sandwich appeared in my mind. I suspected it was a translation rather than a literal request. *You can't eat the kids, I thought. I won't let you.*

Tentacles writhing at strange angles. I think it was pouting. I shook my head. *No, I can't let you do that. Where are you from?*

Weird sensations overwhelmed me—water that floated, a buzzing shriek, gasoline smell, a white sky with black stars. It felt untranslatable and made me dizzy. *Stop, I'm not understanding*—I was freezing then hot, and my insides turned around me. My mouth tasted like scales and salt. Whatever it was saying, my brain couldn't cope.

I staggered toward the door. *Stop!* I begged it. I was drowning in poisonous water, then floating in thick air. I understood this would never stop—not until it had acquired—

A baloney sandwich. Metaphorically speaking.

With that image, all went silent. I felt like I'd been soaked in cold water. I stumbled outside, pressing a hand to my forehead. Dana was waiting there.

"Gary!" she said. "What happened to you?"

I blinked, distracted by my sudden sandwich craving. "There's definitely something in the plumbing and it wants to eat the kids. We've got to stop it."

"How?"

I thought for a moment and remembered the wet feeling it gave me. "I think it lives in water. That's why it's in the pipes. I'm going to shut the water off."

I steeled my mind. Then I marched back into Maintenance and grabbed the shutoff wrench. The creature must have read my thoughts, because I was wracked with an agonizing headache, like a beginning cymbal class in my skull. I fell to my knees. The creature flooded me with confusing sensations of pain and noise. I fought it by humming a lunchmeat commercial jingle from childhood. I crawled forward, trying not to think too hard. I had just spelled the baloney's last name when I hooked the shutoff valve and wrenched it.

Silence filled the room. My headache eased, although my brain kept humming the jingle. For a minute, I thought the creature was dead. Then I felt its presence in the reserve tank—even angrier than before. It must have slithered in there when I turned the water off.

*Oh, no you don't.*

Before it could do anything, I opened the pressure valve. Water sprayed everywhere. I felt pain again—but this time it was someone else suffering, a creature's dying cry. I sensed it begging for help. I was right, the creature needed water—and I was killing it.

I felt awful. It wasn't the creature's fault it was hungry. After all, it was just a predator—doing what it was born to do, like sharks or TV psychics. Maybe if I were stuck in the plumbing on some alien planet, I'd be looking for a sandwich too.

I hadn't planned the next step, but I reacted fast. I grabbed a watercooler jug. I pierced the top with the shutoff wrench and dumped out half the water. Straining under the weight, I pressed it against the open valve. *Come on, buddy. Come on.*

Sssshooop! Something green burst through the wide valve, like a snot ball blown into a Kleenex. It landed squarely in the water jug. The impact knocked me to the floor. The jug landed next to me. I looked at the slimy mass crammed inside the plastic. Eyeballs dotted the surface like a Dalmatian's spots. Green tentacles drooped from the jug's mouth like willow branches, or—

"A fern," said Dana from the doorway. "It totally looks like a fern. You okay?"

"It does, kind of," I said. "And yeah." The tentacles wiggled. I sensed gratitude.

"What do we do with it?"

"I don't know," I said. "Let's take it inside for now."

We took it into my office and set it on the shelf. Vivian joined us, leaving sobbing preschoolers in her wake. Her jaw dropped at the sight.

"We've gotta call the feds about this," she said.

"And give it to them?" Dana asked. "They'll hurt the poor thing."

"It's dangerous," said Vivian. "Isn't it, Gary?"

I looked at the creature in the jug. It wouldn't escape, I was sure. And it didn't look dangerous. Just squished. I got the feeling it was very sorry for what it had done. I said, "Actually, I'm with Dana. I think it'll be okay in the jug. As long as we don't re-pot it."

"But what do we do with it?" asked Vivian.

I looked around my office. *Any ideas?* I asked. I got the image of typing tentacles, and instruction manuals stacked up on my desk. I liked the idea. *It's a deal*, I thought. No one reads the damn things anyway. I said, "Well, I've got an empty shelf here..."

So that's the story of the watercooler jug. After all, with enough monkeys and time, you really *can* get Shakespeare. All I have to do is feed it. You may have noticed that you've been craving a baloney sandwich

for the last ten minutes. It's normal in this office. Here, throw it a Vienna sausage.



## About the Author

**Vylar Kaftan** writes science fiction, fantasy, horror, slipstream, and cleverly-phrased Post-It notes on the fridge. Her stories have appeared in *Strange Horizons*, *ChiZine*, and *Clarkesworld*, among other places. She lives in northern California and has a standard issue tie-dyed T-shirt to prove it. A graduate of Clarion West, she volunteers as a mentor for teenaged writers with the online group Absynthe Muse. Her hobbies include modern-day temple dancing and preparing for a major earthquake. She blogs at <http://www.vylarkaftan.net>.



## About the Artist

**Chrissy Ellsworth** grew up in a suburb of Seattle. A graduate of Provo College in graphic design, Chrissy works as a designer for TBG publishing in Salt Lake City. She and her husband, Spencer, recently collaborated on their newest creation, a baby girl. Visit their website [kikiandsquishy.com](http://kikiandsquishy.com)







