



Something made me look from the amahs to the frangipani tree in the corner. And there she was – Ying. I shivered. Was my fever making me imagine things? I needed to tell Ma and Papa right away, but at this very moment, they were at Bukit Brown Cemetery, tending to Ying’s funeral.

Ten-year-old Bee grows up sheltered and privileged in 1940s Singapore, jealous of her beautiful, perfect elder sister, Ying. When the Japanese attack Singapore, Ying is killed in an air raid at school and the family endure wartime hardship and the horrors of occupation.

But to Bee’s surprise, her sister’s love and care for her survives in an unexpected way and Bee grows to cherish the bonds that hold fast even in the face of devastating loss.

Written with humour and unflinching clarity through the eyes of a child, this coming-of-age novel is an intimate family portrait of sisterhood, emotional resilience and the people we choose to call kin.

visit our website at:
www.marshallcavendish.com/genref

 Marshall Cavendish
Editions



mabel gan

THE GHOST WHO PINCHED ME

Marshall Cavendish Editions

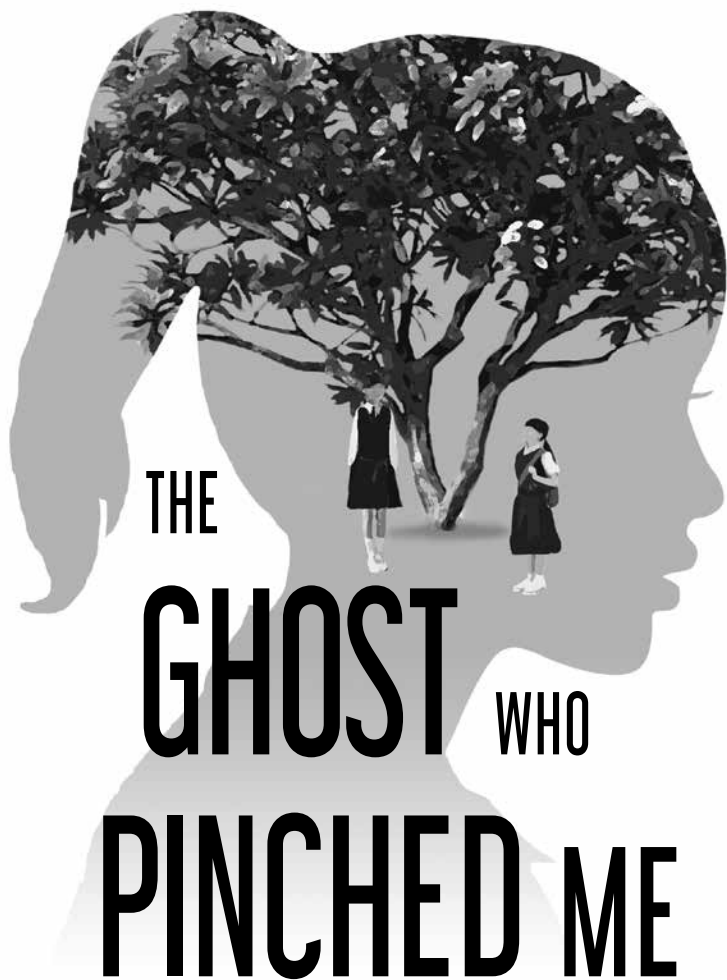
“How does one even tell a story about childhood in a time of war? Yet Mabel Gan has melded innocence and experience, hope and anguish. This story is precious.”

– Gwee Li Sui, poet and literary critic



THE
GHOST WHO
PINCHED ME

mabel gan



THE

GHOST WHO

PINCHED ME

mabel gan

mc Marshall Cavendish
Editions

ONE

I remember the first time I saw Ying. She was standing in the back garden, under the frangipani tree. She was wearing her St Mary's school uniform. Her eyes were big and bright. Her hair was straight and shiny, just like always.



It was a terrible day from the beginning. The sky was covered with grey clouds all morning. I did not touch my lunch, which was only a bowl of porridge and a fried egg with salty chye por. Sitting at the big marble table alone, with the simple food that the amahs, our servants, usually ate, I felt sorry for myself. Before I could sneak off, Yong Cheh, our oldest amah, who was fat and had a big, booming voice, pounced on me.

“Cannot eat? Then go upstairs and sleep!” she barked.

“Naps are for children! I’m ten years old,” I protested indignantly.

“You have a fever! Your Ma asked me to look after you!”

She grabbed my arm roughly and started pulling me away, so I purposely knocked the basket of buah langsung off the table. The small round fruits bounced and rolled everywhere.

“Aiyah! Si geena,” Yong Cheh scolded, as she ran around picking them up one by one.

“Ma says you cannot call me that!” I yelled at her from a safe distance.

“Who said you can raise your voice at me, si geena? Your grandmother will rise from her grave and slap you.”

“She will slap you first if she hears you calling me that.”

“Aiyoh, how dare you! I raised your father from the day he was born.”

I’d heard her say this a thousand times already, so I got bored and ran off. I knew that I could get away with anything that day.

I went to Ma’s sewing room and opened her cupboard of pretty fabrics. There were bolts of shiny silk from China, transparent Swiss voile in bright colours, and my favourite – delicate Italian lace with beautiful, intricate patterns. Ma had a lot of nice things because Papa was a merchant who shipped all sorts of goods from different countries to Singapore. We always had fancy things at home, like caramel sweets wrapped in gold foil, English biscuits filled with lemon cream, and boxes of chocolates with mysterious centres. I was deciding whether to unroll some fabric to play with, which Ma would surely scold me for doing, when I heard a soft knock at the door. It was Siew Cheh, with a cup of barley water. I loved the sweet drink that she always made for me with a bit of lemon.

Siew Cheh was the youngest of our three amahs and my favourite. Even though we already had two amahs, Papa had taken pity on her and brought her into our home. Ma said that she was an orphan, and bad people had wanted to sell her as a mui tsai, or slave girl. Luckily, Mrs Collins, the wife of one of Papa’s business associates, had come to her rescue. I loved

Siew Cheh's heart-shaped face with eyes that always seemed to be smiling. Sometimes, when Ma was mean to me, I secretly wished that Siew Cheh was my mother.

Siew Cheh squatted next to me as I drank my barley water. "Bee ah, now that you are ten years old, I think you understand that serious things are happening. Singapore is under attack, and war can come any time."

I nodded quietly.

"Your poor Ma and Papa are going through a hard time. Even though this terrible thing has happened, they still have to worry about you and the baby. And your Ma is not feeling well these days."

I felt hot tears stinging my eyes, so I drank slowly to hide them.

"Bee, you're a clever girl, and you can help your parents. What you should do now is rest and get well quickly." She put the back of her hand gently on my forehead. It felt cool and soothing. "Your fever is still high. Take a nap so you can get well, hor?"

I agreed to take a nap because what Siew Cheh said made sense. That was why I listened to her. Ma and Papa said that I had to respect the amahs because they were my elders. But the other amahs were stupid. Yong Cheh liked to scold and threaten me, and Eng Cheh, who always looked sleepy because of her long, droopy eyes, would try to bribe me or plead with me. I never listened to them because they never gave me any good reason to.

Upstairs in my room, I lay in bed for a long time, but I couldn't fall asleep. Then I heard some strange noises. I looked out of my bedroom window, but the street was empty and quiet. I hurried to the bathroom on the other side of the house.

The window was too high, so I carefully climbed onto the edge of the earthen pot that held the water for our baths.

I couldn't believe my eyes! The three amahs, in their distinctive samfu of white shirt and black pants, were gathered around the mango tree in the back garden. Siew Cheh and Eng Cheh were digging with the gardener's cangkul while Yong Cheh supervised them. I immediately knew what they were doing! They were stealing Ma's jewellery that Papa had buried there just a week ago. He'd said it was to keep it safe in case the Japanese invaded Singapore. I wanted to scream, but I knew that Ma and Papa were not there to hear me, so I watched helplessly, my heart pounding fiercely in my chest.

Sure enough, I saw the amahs lifting the red silk bags out of the ground and dusting them off. Siew Cheh opened one and took out something shiny. She admired it, then held it up to one ear. They all laughed. It made me so angry that tears sprang to my eyes.

Something made me turn from the amahs to the frangipani tree in the corner. And there she was – Ying. She was looking straight up at me. I shivered. Was my fever making me imagine things? I needed to tell Ma and Papa right away, but at this very moment in time, they were at Bukit Brown, tending to Ying's funeral.