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"VUCA?" whispered one of the spiritlings.

"Volatile, Uncertain, Complex, and Ambiguous," his friend whispered back.

"Did she haunt a SkillsFuture course?" one of the spirits asked and giggled.

With traditional rites and offerings to the departed at an all-time low, the ancient spirits of Singapore have come together to form the Grassroots Committee of Ghosts and Monsters, aiming to help its members upgrade their skills and stay relevant in a constantly evolving urban landscape. Lady Pontianak steers the committee towards progress as they diligently chart their lifelong learning paths and master essential digital skills for the 21st century.

But when a mysterious new spirit gatecrashes their meeting with a radical, extremist proposal—a seductive alternative to their laborious efforts—his offer proves to be extremely difficult to refuse . . .

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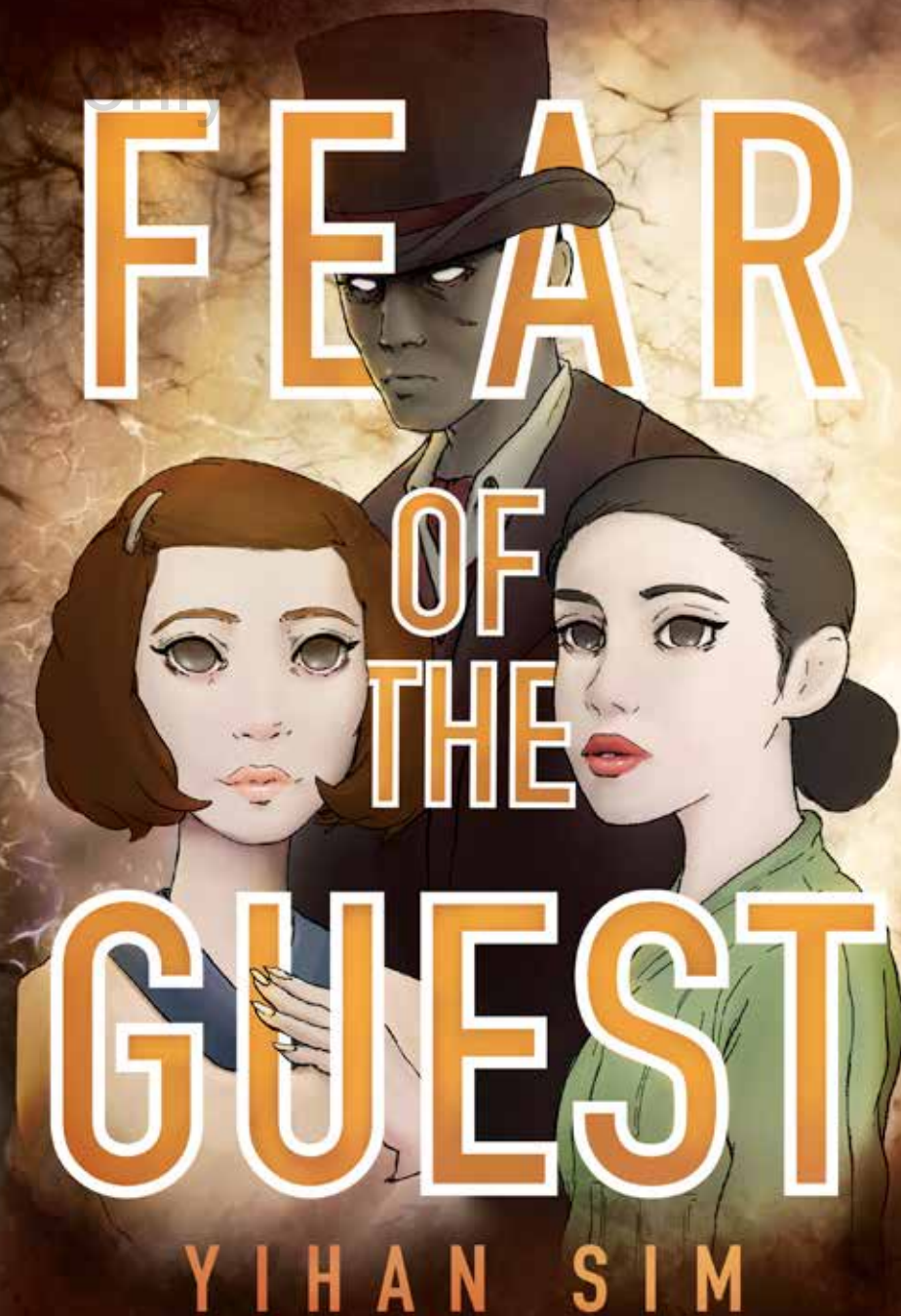


YIHAN SIM

FEAR OF THE GUEST

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Published by Marshall Cavendish Editions
An imprint of Marshall Cavendish International



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Marshall Cavendish Corporation, 800 Westchester Ave, Suite N-641, Rye Brook, NY 10573, USA • Marshall Cavendish International (Thailand) Co Ltd, 253 Asoke, 16th Floor, Sukhumvit 21 Road, Klongtoey Nua, Wattana, Bangkok 10110, Thailand • Marshall Cavendish (Malaysia) Sdn Bhd, Times Subang, Lot 46, Subang Hi-Tech Industrial Park, Batu Tiga, 40000 Shah Alam, Selangor Darul Ehsan, Malaysia

National Library Board, Singapore Cataloguing in Publication Data

Name(s): Sim, Yihan.
Title: Fear of the guest / Yihan Sim.
Description: Singapore : Marshall Cavendish Editions, [2020]
Identifier(s): OCN 1156324507 | ISBN 978-981-48-9313-8 (paperback)
Subject(s): LCSH: Good and evil--Fiction. | Ghost stories.
Classification: DDC S823--dc23

Printed in Singapore

Cover artwork by Dan Ng

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客人来，看爸爸，
爸爸不在家，
我请客人先坐下，
再敬一杯茶。

When a guest comes, to see Papa,
but Papa is away,
“Please have a seat
and a cup of tea,”
this is what I must say.

– old nursery song

STRANGER IN THE DARK

A face in the window.

Its single luminous eye stared, wide and unblinking, beneath a swathe of long, black hair. Red, red lips curved upward lazily like the bow of a river *sampan* on moonlit waters.

Slowly, the face drew back and a slim white hand glided up, briskly sweeping the hair up into a tight, neat chignon, out of the eyes and snug at the nape of the neck. Lady Pontianak permitted herself a second to admire her reflection, patting her hair, pleased with herself. She had watched that YouTube tutorial four times to master the hairstyle.

Satisfied with her countenance, she turned away and surveyed the straggled group arrayed before her with a small sigh. The numbers dwindled slightly with every meeting. Most of its members did not look well; they were pale and faded around the edges.

The room they gathered in had seen better days. It was a silent, decaying flat; hollowed out and devoid of residents. The public housing block and its two neighbours had been

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drained of its inhabitants three years ago as a result of an en bloc sale. They stood patiently, gathering rust, mould and bird droppings, waiting to be demolished and turned into million-dollar condominiums more befitting of their gentrified neighbourhood.

Meanwhile, it served well as a meeting venue for the Grassroots Committee of Ghosts and Monsters. It was quiet and had plenty of space for the buffet catering. Or what passed for a buffet catering. Little chattering house spirits had generously brought the offerings they received that week, consisting of pears, oranges, pineapples, iced gem biscuits, and *huat kueh*, the steamed rice flour cakes that all ghosts loved. The meeting members had fruit punch in small white plastic cups, savouring it gleefully, pleased at how human they looked.

Lady Pontianak nodded at Uncle Bhuta, the Secretary for the Grassroots Committee of Ghosts and Monsters.

“Remember to take the attendance for the minutes of meeting,” she reminded him firmly. He was old and tended to forget things these days. Uncle Bhuta looked affronted and scrawled on his cardboard clipboard pompously.

“Alright, everyone. Let’s get the meeting started,” Lady Pontianak announced. She spoke in a clear, even voice. The meeting members settled themselves into the plastic chairs immediately without fuss or dawdling. Lady Pontianak had been the Chairwoman of the Grassroots Committee of Ghosts and Monsters since its inception. She was the oldest and wisest amongst them.

“Are there any amendments to the minutes for the last meeting? If not, let’s begin. Can we have the agenda up, please.” Lady Pontianak shot Uncle Bhuta a slightly annoyed look despite herself. Uncle Bhuta fiddled with the archaic laptop someone had salvaged from the dump and the PowerPoint slides sputtered into view.

The meeting agenda had a staggering twelve items but the committee members fell into contented gossiping and complaining about humans at once.

“Can you believe,” Auntie Chin heaved. “Since their grandmother died, my family puts out joss sticks only *once* a week now! I used to receive them every single day at six in the evening on the dot!”

“Army recruits don’t swap ghost stories all that much anymore,” mused Marie Rose, one of the Pulau Tekong ghosts. “Our island used to teem with ghosts and little monsters in the forests, plump and well nourished from the soldiers’ tales and boyish fears. Now, there are only a few of us left and we’re all lonely.”

“Oh, little one,” piped up one of the Marbles Children, despite looking much younger than Marie Rose. They looked perpetually like children no matter how old they got. In the dead of night, they clattered their glass marbles on the floors of public housing flats. Generations of Singaporeans grew up falling asleep to the sound of their antics emanating from the ceilings.

“Could you steal us a Nintendo Switch from the recruits next time? Pretty please... I’m quite bored of marbles

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already,” another Marbles Child whined. “Don’t forget the charger too.”

Before an aggrieved-looking Marie Rose could reply, Lady Pontianak cut in swiftly. “Thank you, everyone, for sharing your experiences. Shall we get back to the most important agenda item at hand, which is to brainstorm strategies on how to future-proof our existence?”

Predictably, the meeting fell silent. “As you know, the world is changing rapidly. We need to undergo a transformation process and continue up-skilling ourselves so as to keep up with the times. Humans have so many more... things to occupy their time nowadays. Ritual offerings and ghost stories are decreasing at an alarming rate,” Lady Pontianak gestured at a self-important graph featuring a sharp downward gash. “I fear that one day, we will no longer have enough to sustain our existence. We need to do something to stay relevant in this VUCA world.”

“VUCA?” whispered one of the spiritlings.

“Volatile, Uncertain, Complex, and Ambiguous,” his friend whispered back.

“Did she haunt a SkillsFuture course?” one of the more mischievous spirits asked and giggled.

Lady Pontianak ignored the chattering with great dignity. The older ghosts nodded in understanding, their outlines blurry and indistinct in the light of the full moon. They knew that the fears of people gave them their existence. They conducted regular hauntings and organised scary manifestations to keep the spark of fear alive among the inhabitants of their estates.

They also knew, no, they *felt*, the waning of their power and ability to affect the physical world. Concrete reality, as humans perceived it, increasingly felt more and more so to them—more oppressive, immovable, fixed; very unlike the fluid, supple malleability of the older world of wooden villages and tropical jungle. The older world—the world in which ghosts and monsters thrived. They understood the importance of Lady Pontianak’s concerns.

As if punctuating their thoughts, the moment abruptly swelled with motion as someone unexpectedly swept into their meeting room on the coattails of a cold midnight breeze. No, not someone, *something*. The newcomer swirled into the room with all the impressive and obnoxious drama of a haunting, as if trying to frighten humans. It whipped like a great dark vortex, blacker than the vacuum of space, and with its blustery force, spun and swept the items in the room into the air.

The meeting members were affronted. No ghost or monster showed off its powers in the presence of another. Even Lady Pontianak herself floated in a stately and gracious manner when she entered meeting rooms of the committee. They were certainly no hapless humans, quivering helplessly at the show of supernatural force. It was rude of the stranger to expect it of them by way of his excessive showmanship.

“Well, a good evening to you too,” sniffed Lady Pontianak. “Who are you? We’ve not had any new members to the Grassroots Committee of Ghosts and Monsters since 1999.”

The newcomer laughed, a deep boom that rattled the window frames and shook the foundations of the building.

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The black vortex swirled around the room restlessly and then speckled with static like an old television set. It settled into multiple vague outlines, switching from one to another, as if trying to decide on a form to take on. Finally, it solidified into what looked like a Victorian gentleman, anachronistic in his satin top hat, cravat and wool coat.

Lady Pontianak sniffed again, lowering her eyelashes in suspicion. “Now will you introduce yourself? You have interrupted our meeting.”

“Forgive me.” The stranger bowed. “I am only a traveller, passing by. A Guest.”

“You may stay if you wish. We welcome new members,” Lady Pontianak said doubtfully, eyeing his odd choice of outfit. Ghosts and monsters did not feel the heat and humidity of Singapore’s sultry climate. Still, the Guest looked out of place, like an actor about to step onto the set of a period film.

The Guest surveyed the meeting members leisurely, his eyes dancing and alighting on Uncle Bhuta, Auntie Chin, Marie Rose, the Marbles Children, the Chinese vampire, the Eurasian vampire, the Monster Under the Bed, the Child of the Bridge, the Woman in the Red Dress, and the various spiritlings and sprites in turn, before finally turning to Lady Pontianak.

“As I said, I am merely a Guest,” he bowed again in an exaggerated manner, with that old-fashioned flourish of the fingers. “I have only come into my full powers recently, after decades of incubation and maturation. It is only

polite of me to come by and meet my... *predecessors*.” He savoured the last word like a *gula-gula tarik* on his tongue, syrupy and luxurious.

“Suit yourself. We have work to do,” Lady Pontianak said very curtly, turning back to her PowerPoint slides.

“He’s only here for the food,” muttered Auntie Chin to nobody in particular.

The Guest laughed again, shrilly and hysterically this time, like an antiquated ghost that lurked in deep jungle forests. “If only you could see yourselves!” he burst out. “All of you! So outdated, so pathetic, so OBSOLETE.”

The meeting members turned their eyes to him in confusion now. All ghosts and monsters stuck together. They tried to survive into the future together. They all worried about fading away into oblivion—unremembered, powerless and trapped in the annals of time. They even formed a Grassroots Committee, for heavens’ sake! A proper one, with a Chairwoman and a Secretary and a Treasurer and minutes of meeting and PowerPoint slides.

The Guest broke into their reverie. “All of you are relics of the past. You deserve to become obsolete. *I* am the future.”

Evidently, The Guest had a flair for the dramatic, for at that moment he swirled himself into a great dark vortex once more and barrelled out of their small meeting room.

The members of the Grassroots Committee of Ghosts and Monsters looked at each other for a long time. It was the most excitement they had had in a committee meeting for a while now.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Born and bred in Singapore, Yihan Sim loves animals, tattoos, storytelling, music, and most of all, her small hairy dachshund. She graduated from the National University of Singapore with a Bachelor of Arts with Honours in Philosophy. Her research interests include ancient Greek philosophy, classical Chinese philosophy and Zen Buddhist philosophy.

Fear of the Guest is her first novel.