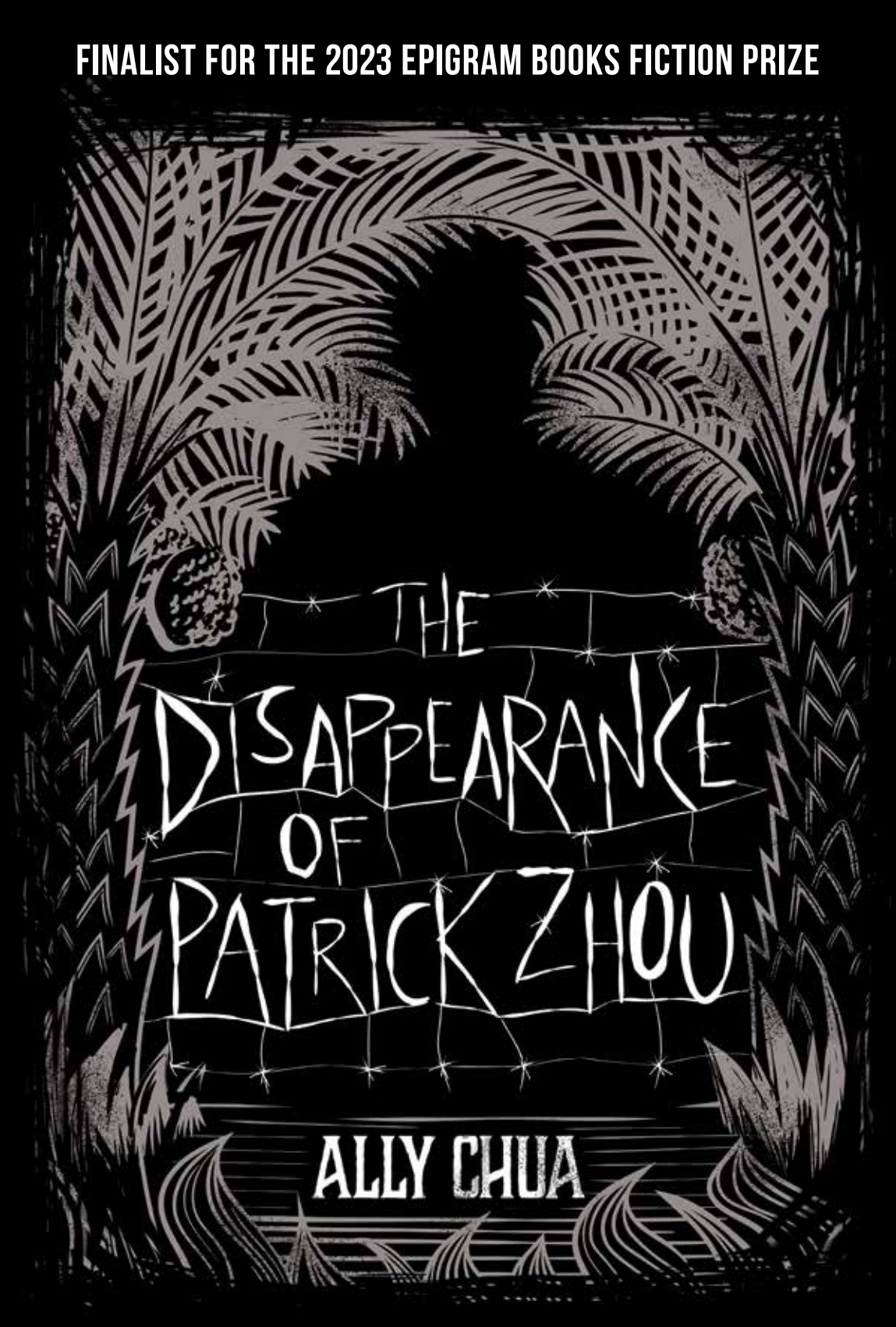


**FINALIST FOR THE 2023 EPIGRAM BOOKS FICTION PRIZE**



THE  
DISAPPEARANCE  
OF  
PATRICK ZHOU

**ALLY CHUA**

“A narrative tapestry woven with incredible finesse, which enraptures readers in a web of secrets and thrills. In this evocative setting where power and morality collide, Layla’s determined pursuit of her family’s enigmatic past kept me entranced from start to end. The rich layers of this enthralling multi-generational odyssey serve up a resonance that lingers long after I’ve savoured the last word.”

–**KYLA ZHAO**, author of *The Fraud Squad*

“A smart, ambitious debut by an exciting new voice, and a well-crafted page-turner that I found hard to put down. *The Disappearance of Patrick Zhou* tackles questions like: What happens when the dirty secrets of a family business come to light? Can the rebellious heir to a dynasty ever outrun her family’s brutal past? Think *Succession*, but with more humidity and violence, and set among Malaysian oil palm plantations. Ally Chua has deftly interlaced family drama, corporate corruption, a whiff of murder and one plucky journalist trying to unravel it all into a stunning whodunnit that will have you guessing till the very end.”

–**STEPHANIE CHAN**, author of *Roadkill for Beginners*

“Ally Chua gives vicious corporate dynasty a gothic turn in a Johor estate lurking with buried secrets, where too-real monsters emerge from the unearthed rot to drag generations of a family into a reckoning with both their bloody legacy and each other. A haunting in which the worst ghosts are ourselves.”

–**WEN-YI LEE**, author of *The Dark We Know*

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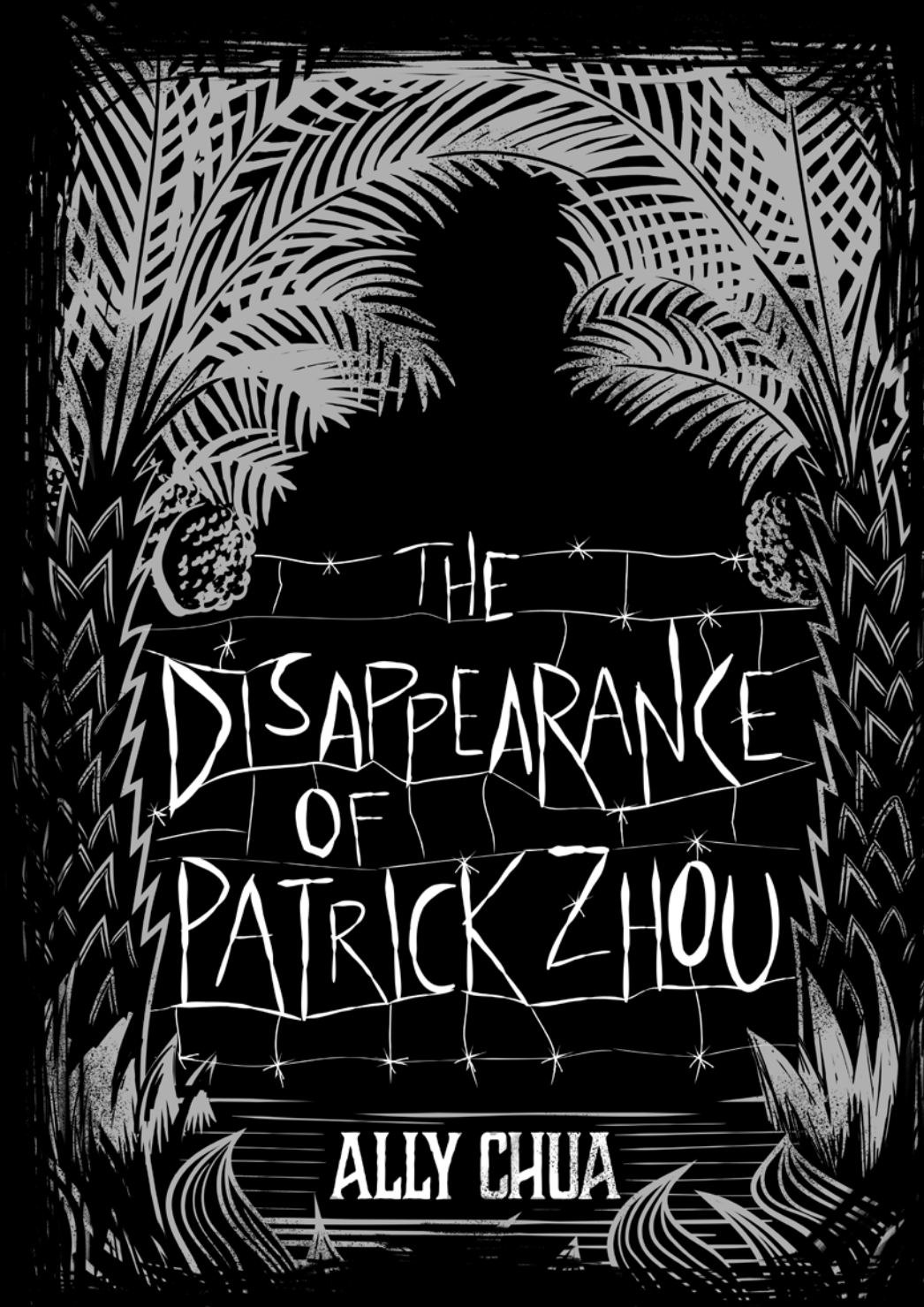
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EPIGRAM



PART ONE

# ONE

**WE ARE ON** the highway, leaving Johor Bahru, heading in the direction of Batu Pahat. We've passed the skyscraping condominiums and the bulk of Johor's new, glittery developments. Now both sides of the expressway are flanked by oil palms, each herringbone trunk blurring into the next. Both sides of our car are surrounded by motorcycles, riders clad in waterproof jackets, gloved hands gunning at throttles. And surrounding these bikes are the container trucks, heavy thirty-tonners carrying cargo.

On this highway, vehicles go fast. I wonder sometimes what it would be like if a rider lost control of their vehicle, both bike chassis and human body rolling under the next vehicle going too fast, if the body would be recognisable, if a head would detach from a weak neck.

The car is stuffy—the air-conditioning is sputtering, dying a slow death. I wish I had driven my own car, but Aunt Jenny and my dad balked at the idea of me driving a new car into Johor, fearing a carjacking. Instead, Dad sent Seng Huat to pick me up in Singapore.

Dark clouds populate the sky, bisected by frequent gashes of lightning. It is going to rain soon. In the back seat, I check my emails, making sure there are no loose ends from my abrupt departure two hours earlier. *Family emergency*, I messaged my editor. *I have to take urgent leave and I am not sure when I can come back.*

Grandma's house is forty-five minutes away from Johor Bahru, in a rural part of Johor where my family own or sublet most of the land. I know we are arriving when—fifteen minutes to our destination—the woodland and jungle turn to wide fields, manicured and smooth.

It is in Johor where my great-grandfather first made his fortune through rubber and trading, and it is where he made his first land purchase, anchoring him to this corner of Malaysia. Formally known as Angsana Estate, the land is a hundred hectares in size, with a small plantation and office at the entrance of the estate. Drive further in and you will see the family house—Angsana House, built by the hands of my great-grandfather's own family, so the story goes, but I always thought it more likely that a house this size was built by hired workers.

The office is a modest two-storey building, serving both as an administrative office and tourist centre for a small, ten-hectare model plantation, for visitors curious about the Zhou-Guthrie business. Our actual plantations are not here in Johor, of course—they span entire districts and are located farther upstate, all the way to Kedah, along with huge swathes of East Malaysia. Some are very remote.

Over the years, the bulk of my family's businesses expanded beyond plantation ownership, so the main offices were moved from sleepy Johor to Singapore and Kuala Lumpur. We acquired other Malaysian land and properties, from glitzy condominiums in KLCC to beach chalets in Langkawi. But my grandparents prefer the mansion. My grandfather, a cranky curmudgeon, likes that he is far enough from civilisation to be isolated. My grandmother likes the space and greenery, and grows plenty of vegetables, herbs and fruit trees.

Me, however...Despite living in Angsana House for the first seven years of my life—or perhaps *because* I lived there for the first seven years of my life—I've always thought of my grandparents' house as creepy. The official route to Angsana House is through an iron gate covered in green rust, then a dark, winding road through tall trees. Out of the foliage, a lawn emerges, and then the maroon mansion. Two towering angšana trees

frame the peeling façade, giving the house its name. The house is old, the surrounding woodland festering, and despite my family spending a good chunk of money on maintenance, it never seems to quite catch up to the speed of the house's decay.

Incoming cars will brake on gravel in front of a sheltered front porch, riddled with algae stains and creepers. Angsana House is shaped like a large rectangle with an enclosed courtyard, with the front porch jutting out from the longer side of the rectangle. When you are parked in front of it, all you see is its imposing façade with rows of darkened windows like dead eyes.

The front doors open to an ostentatious foyer dominated by a glass-blown chandelier, porcelain vases and colourful glassware. Calligraphy and bold portraits of my ancestors hang from each wall, their expressions severe. My family does not believe in minimalism.

I have a fear of dark places, and to me the house is *always* dark. The corridors are dim, the furniture casts long shadows and the light fixtures in each room, unchanged since the eighties, carry that gold tint that never seem as bright as fluorescent light. Living in the middle of nowhere means that the house has frequent blackouts and sporadic electricity. No, I never liked staying here.

We arrive as the skies open up. Aunt Theresa and Aunt Tina are already waiting for us. Aunt Tina looks, as always, immaculately unapproachable in her pantsuit and stiletto heels. Her husband Tom is behind her, talking on his phone. He gives me a quick wave before returning to his call.

Aunt Theresa, on the other hand, looks dressed down and comfortable in her linen dress and sun hat.

Both my aunts take turns to hug me and tell me I am getting fat.

"Your dad is inside," Aunt Tina says.

"Oh! I thought he would take a while. Last I heard, he was in China."

"We've been in Malaysia for two days. Our investors are in town for the week. Oh, Lee—don't use the back toilet on the first level. The light is broken."

"Why are the investors in Malaysia?" I ask, taking off my shoes.

“They were in KL to attend a conference and we invited them to spend some time with us after. We just checked them into Centauri Johor. It’s quite fortunate, actually, that we are all in Johor right now. We got to Ma right away, instead of flying from halfway around the world.”

“Speaking of which—are Hunter and Wallace coming?” I ask them.

“They should reach tomorrow,” Aunt Theresa says. “Takes longer, you know—flying in from London and New York.”

My dad is standing at the entrance foyer. He looks tired, his eye bags prominent.

“Long day?” I ask.

“Have you eaten? Did you ask Sabrina to turn off all open flames in your apartment?”

Sabrina is the live-in helper in my condominium. My dad, ever practical. I nod as he puts his hand on my shoulder in an acknowledging pat. We Zhous are not big on public displays of affection.

“Come,” he says. “Let’s go see Ah Ma.”

She is almost hidden amid the landscape of medical equipment and blankets. She looks skeletal, wrinkled skin sagging over bone. There is a breathing mask pulled over her nose and mouth, and though it should be tight, it looks loose on her small, fragile face.

“They found her in the toilet last night,” Grandpa says. “We think she slipped on a puddle of water. When Rosa saw her, she had already soiled her pants, so she was there for a while.”

My breath hitches in my throat.

“How bad is it?” my dad asks.

“According to the doctor, she fractured both hips and there’s a lot of internal bleeding. They wanted to keep her in hospital, but we knew she wouldn’t want to stay there, so we set up this portable ward.”

“Surgery?” Aunt Tina asks.

“Too much.” Grandpa shakes his head. “Too big an operation for her body. The doctors said that at her age, there’s no guarantee she could survive something that invasive. For now, we are trying to keep her comfortable.”

Dad heads over to the bed and looks at his mother. He pulls the blanket to her neck, but she does not stir.

The storm reaches its crescendo when dinner time comes around. We help with closing the windows, pulling in the louvred panes with much difficulty. The windows are stuck and they do not submit willingly. I tell Dad we need to replace them, and he shushes me. “Grandpa will not hear of it.”

Ronghua and Rosa have prepared a feast. We are in the formal dining hall, the big marble table heaped with overflowing dishes. A whole chicken in savoury soy sauce sits at the centre of the table. Assam pedas fish with tomatoes and lady’s fingers. To one side, thick slabs of otak-otak wrapped in banana leaves. A big pot of vegetable curry.

We are halfway through dinner when the lights stutter out. For a few seconds, all I hear is the patter of rain in black nothingness—

A scream: a long, drawn-out shriek, from my grandma’s room. I hear someone, perhaps Rosa or Aunt Tina, push their chair back. A crash and the sound of something shattering.

“Get a torchlight,” someone says.

And it is dark still. The sound of thunder and rain is overwhelming; I can feel cold fingers tapping up my spine. I shudder involuntarily.

“Layla?” my dad says quietly. I can’t see him, but I hear the concern in his voice. “Lee, you okay?”

I cannot reply. Someone switches on the flashlight on their iPhone, and I see disembodied heads all around me, illuminated by the light. Someone puts their hand on my shoulder and I jump.

“It’s me,” my dad says. “Layla, are you okay?”



I nod, but my imagination is going wild, thinking about other hands pulling my hair in the dark.

“Just a blackout. Shall we go check on Ah Ma?”

I nod again. We troop up to Grandma’s bedroom, the path illuminated by trustworthy smartphones. My grandma is awake, huddled within Tina’s arms. Her wide eyes are fixed on the window, that square of lawn and plantation visible from the house.

“Patrick,” my grandma says, staring at the window. “Can you ask him to come in? It’s raining outside.”

When I was younger, Uncle Patrick told me ghost stories. Supernatural hauntings, urban myths, black magic rituals, whatever he could think of. Here is one that stayed with me:

*This is an old ritual to see your future spouse. Wait for midnight. Stand in front of a mirror with an apple and a paring knife. Make sure all the lights are off. Peel the apple slowly, making sure the skin is peeled off in a continuous ribbon. Do not break the ribbon at any cost. Once the apple is completely pared, the face of your spouse will be revealed in the mirror.*

*Out of curiosity and a desire to see the face of her future beloved, a young girl tried the ritual. She was startled by a noise, and broke the peel by accident.*

*Her reflection in the mirror turned grotesque—mouth split open, face a mangled mess. A week later, she was involved in a car crash. The paramedics found her dead, looking exactly like her mutilated reflection.*

I could never sleep after hearing Patrick’s stories. I grew afraid of the mirror in my bathroom, of looking at the angsana trees outside my window, of ghosts following me home.

I am afraid of a lot of things. And I am most afraid of the dark.

\* \* \*

I pick at my food, mashing the otak-otak into smaller pieces as my aunts argue.

“She’s almost gone; her mind’s not quite right,” Tina says.

“But she was always obsessed with Pat,” Theresa replies. “What if...oh, this is ridiculous even to say out loud. What if Patrick ‘knew’ her time is up? And he’s waiting for her?”

There is an ugly gash of silence. I’ve not heard the disappearance of my uncle discussed for years—the family tiptoes around the subject, as if Patrick is away on a long holiday, as if he just *happened* to be out of town— as if he will be back at any moment. Now, my aunts are talking about his ghost as if it’s perfectly natural.

“Don’t be ridiculous, all right?” Tina says finally. “It may just be Ma’s imagination. Who knows, maybe Patrick is still alive.”

My father laughs. “What, is he going to come back after twenty years and say, ‘Sorry guys, what did I miss?’”

“I’d rather believe that, than Ma being haunted by a *ghost*—”

“It’s painful to listen to your rubbish,” my grandpa cuts in. “Show your mother some respect.”

“We are not disrespecting her, Pa,” Theresa says.

“I said it’s painful to listen to your rubbish. Did you hear me?”

The table is silent. My grandfather has a sharp tongue when he gets upset, and no one is safe from his insults. Aunt Tina is starting to look angry, and she picks up her rice bowl with a loud clang. I focus on my food, mashing the otak-otak into an even mushier paste.

“We just signed the contract with Audi,” my father says, nudging the subject matter elsewhere. “We will be their sole distributor in China.”

“Why not a BMW deal?” my grandfather says. “Chinese people prefer BMWs. You’re a fool for distributing Audi there.”

My dad does not seem perturbed. “We are optimistic about sales.”

“Chinese people like Audis as well. We did our market research before going in,” Tom, my uncle-in-law, says. Grandpa ignores him.

“How about the Shenzhen Centauri?” Grandpa asks.

Aunt Tina hesitates. “The investors are in town. We’ll be showing them our flagship Centauris in Malaysia and then Singapore.”

“Why has it not been finalised yet? It is taking the better part of a year, while the construction site bleeds money.”

“There’s been a problem with the foundation that we did not anticipate. The investors are using this as a reason to withdraw their commitment.”

Grandpa scoffs. “Always thought the Shenzhen site was stupid. Now, if Patrick was here, he wouldn’t have lost the Shanghai land deal to Marriott.”

“Joseph, we are trying, okay?” Aunt Tina says. Tom puts a hand on her shoulder.

“You need good business sense to deal with Chinese investors,” Grandpa continues. “You have to speak their language, be Chinese enough, flatter them, make them feel important. You went to China all uppity with your fake London accent—you speak like you are looking down on them, Tina. No wonder they don’t want to work with you.”

“Let’s just eat dinner, shall we?” my father says.

Instead, Aunt Tina puts her bowl down. “Excuse me,” she says. She pushes her chair back and walks off. Tom glares at my grandpa briefly before getting up to follow his wife.

“How dare you leave the table!” my grandfather barks at her retreating figure. He turns back to us. “Ungrateful swine, that’s what she is.”

We finish dinner soon after. Ronghua and Rosa clear the dishes, the curry pot still full; mountains of rice, chicken, pork belly and otak-otak tumble into black garbage bags.

*A man was driving on the North-South Expressway when his car broke down. He told his wife to stay in the car with their baby, before leaving to check what was wrong. He popped the car bonnet up. The wife waited, playing with their baby. She waited for a long time.*

*After a while, a police car passed the vehicle. It doubled back, reversing*

*slowly into view before stopping. A policewoman ran up to the passenger side door. She beckoned to the wife to get out and not to look back. Together, they rushed into the waiting police car.*

*But the wife did look back. And in front of the car, hidden from view by the bonnet, was the half-eaten body of her husband.*

After I heard that story, I cried. I had nightmares of a lonely highway and a wife hiding in the passenger seat, just metres away from the horrible death of her husband.

My dad was furious with Patrick after that. “Stop giving Lee nightmares, for God’s sake!”

Still, I went to my uncle almost every day, asking for new stories. I was simultaneously terrified and entranced, addicted to the dread I felt deep in my bones.

Like ghost stories, my memory of Uncle Patrick is coloured by murkiness. All I know is that he disappeared under mysterious circumstances when I was seven years old. There was a police investigation, but nothing came of it.

After that, it was as if Patrick’s disappearance became a taboo topic.

For the longest time, I did not understand why. Then, one year, I took a job at Zhou-Guthrie Berhad during my school holidays.

On my first day, my dad took me to a meeting with a government official. We brought along a huge hamper, brimming with abalone, bird’s nest, champagne and cognac. The official spoke about the damage that recent plantation fires had caused to the municipality. My dad wrote a cheque on the spot for the sum total of the damages mentioned.

On my second day, I saw the bloated corpse of a plantation worker who had committed suicide in the river. Our company paid for the funeral, gave

a huge compensation cheque to the widow, and sent a sterile answer when a local journalist called.

“Our family is not like other families, Lee,” my dad once said. My grandfather first made his fortune off the blood and suffering of others. His eldest son Patrick had a natural proclivity for the business. Patrick and my grandpa forced landowners off their lands, clashed with environmentalists and played dodgeball with enforcement. Patrick was ruthless and destined to inherit the business—and Patrick was also the only victim, the only one not to surface from the threats that befell our family for years.

My family thought ourselves tough, immune from attacks. Patrick’s disappearance was the bad karma that people promised was due to us. No wonder my family is afraid to talk about Patrick. His disappearance is on us.

There is another story about our family, and it is also not a pleasant one.

There used to be a textile factory upstream from our largest Muar estate. It was a small outfit, locally run, and they did not dispose of their dyes properly. In six months, most of our oil palms died and the soil turned orange. The owner of the factory was Rodzi bin Osman, famous for the once-nationally distributed Rodzi brand of tee-shirts.

My uncle and dad knew where the man lived. They knew he had a daughter my age.

So one afternoon, I can’t remember exactly when, my dad and Patrick took me out of school, and we drove to another school nearby with yellow walls and kids playing in the yard. I can still see my uncle, handsome in his aviator sunglasses and blue jeans, talking to a schoolteacher. The teacher was hesitant at first, but she visibly relaxed when she saw me in the back seat. Within a few minutes, a young girl came over to our car and climbed in with me.

Her name was Fadi. She was a pretty girl with long black hair. I wanted to play with her hair and I did, tying it into pigtails. The four of us spent

the afternoon cruising around Muar—we had ice cream at a café and went to Jetty Nelayan. I still think about that slow afternoon sometimes—it was the thrill of missing school coupled with an idyllic outing.

Towards the end of the day, my dad drove us to a forested area. After a while, we couldn’t see anything beyond the vegetation on both sides, thick and impenetrable. My father stopped by the side of a dirt road, saying that he felt a bump. I accompanied my dad in searching around the car for any rocks or unfortunate roadkill. After a while, I realised that Fadi wasn’t around, so I started looking for her.

I saw Uncle Patrick pulling Fadi into view.

She had blood dripping from her palm down to her dress, and she was crying.

My uncle was carrying a bloodied penknife.

Patrick was calm. He kneeled and unscrewed a bottle of what looked to be an antiseptic solution. He poured it over her wound and Fadi screamed, trying to pull her hand away. Patrick held on tight. He bandaged her palm with expert fingers.

“It’s all right now,” he said to Fadi, who was sniffing. “Now, I want you to do something for me. When you get home, when your parents fuss about your wound, tell your father that it could have been a lot worse.”

We dropped Fadi off soon after, when the sky had turned dark and blue. Fadi’s mum was crying hysterically when Fadi ran into her arms.

The factory never dumped dyes into the river again. One year later, they closed down, though I was never sure if our family had anything to do with it.

We take turns at Grandma’s bedside.

I am close to my grandma—for six years, I was the only child in Angsana House since my cousins resided overseas. Seeing her comatose makes me melancholy. It is a helpless sort of sadness that sits deep. I make sure the air-conditioning is not too cold. Then I sit by her bedside and play Anita Mui, her favourite singer, on my phone.

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prize is a great privilege for any writer, and so I am deeply appreciative that the judges found value in my story about an insidious, powerful dynastic family.

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Ally Chua was the 2019 Singapore Unbound Fellow for New York City, and a member of writing collective */s@ber*. She has been published in *QLRS*, *Cordite Poetry Review*, *Lammergeier Magazine* and *Thimble Magazine*. Her poetry collection, *Acts of Self Consumption*, was published by Recent Work Press in Summer 2023. *The Disappearance of Patrick Zhou* is her first novel.



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**“A narrative tapestry woven with  
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The Zhou-Guthrie company is a powerful one, with an oil palm fortune built on the suffering of others. One night, Patrick Zhou, the charismatic heir to the business, disappears en route to a conference, never to be seen again.

Fifteen years later, Zhou-Guthrie is a failing dynasty. The matriarch, Doris Zhou, is on her deathbed. In her last lucid moments, Doris tasks her granddaughter, Layla, with finding out what happened to Patrick. To solve this disappearance, Layla will uncover corporate espionage, environmental crimes and family secrets—perhaps intimately connected to the ghost stories Uncle Patrick told her years ago.

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