

Pearl

On the day Emanuel deserted her, Pearl threw Semah out, sealed her rooms with wax, chained and padlocked the walnut-pannelled doors and nailed planks across the entrance. Each clang of the hammer echoed through the vast mansion and made the servants flinch. The west wing—where her sister-wife and rival for her husband's affections had once resided—was off-limits.

“Where will she go?” Gum-ghee asked her mistress in Cantonese.

Pearl dropped the hammer. Panting with fury she cried, “there's no hell for Jews. But whatever swamp she washes up on will do.” She spun around to face her servant. “She knew Emanuel's plans yet said nothing! That woman and her Sikh manservant! Good riddance to bad rubbish!”

She folded her tiny body at the waist. Her chin fell against her pounding chest. Gum-ghee reached out to help but quickly withdrew when her mistress straightened like a jack-in-a-box. Pearl's forehead beaded with sweat, trapping wisps of black hair against her porcelain skin. Her eyes roamed wildly. Taking the stairs two at a time, she screamed,

“More chains! Bring me a padlock! Wood and nails! Wood and nails!”

Servants hurried the supplies up the grand staircase and watched with a mixture of wonder and terror as their mistress slammed shut the vast double doors to Emanuel's study. She wrapped chains around the handles, clamped on a greasy padlock and pocketed the key. It hit the other one with a clink. Pushing aside assistance, she slapped lengths of plywood across the door, nailed them in place and backed away to admire her handiwork. Her servants trembled, then scurried out of her way when she pivoted and sprinted back to her rooms. Collapsing on the bed, she pulled at the sheets with her teeth - a tigress ripping the skin off a goat.

Each time she moved the keys tinkled. She thrust a hand into her pocket to silence their impertinence. She didn't trust putting the keys in a drawer or in a safety deposit box. Nor did she trust that they wouldn't be discovered if she hurled them down the hill or buried them in the garden, as she was sorely tempted to do. Instead, she looped them on a chain around her neck under her clothes. Feeling them chafe her skin gave her cold comfort. Pearl had lost face. In her humiliation, she imagined the bamboo telegraph choking with gossip. Diners in teahouses would be so engrossed that steaming dumplings dangling from their chopsticks would grow cold. At mah-jong parties, players would raise an eyebrow over Pearl's cruel joss while secretly harbouring a tinge of schadenfreude. And in social clubs a dismissive sucking of teeth would follow the gossiping about a foreigner who had squandered a fortune, abandoned his Chinese spouse and child, and departed the Colony with his first wife, the Indian giantess named Semah.

“There is a messenger from your father,” Gum-ghee said for the second time in as many days. Pearl ignored the announcements and anything else anyone had to say. The household learned very quickly to hold their tongues. But her father's coolie remained resolute. He had memorized Master Li's overtures of reconciliation and stood below Pearl's veranda wailing:

“Come back to the bosom of your family, to the love and protection of your father.” And each day, receiving no response, he walked away, sag-shouldered and filled with worry about how to report his failure. From the mullioned window of her bedroom in the East Wing, Pearl watched him go.

Her father had delayed her at his home over the Chinese New Year holiday before giving her the shocking news of Emanuel’s desertion. Stunned, she heard him recount Emanuel’s foolish business gamble. How he had risked everything by purchasing shares on margin and how—when the share values dropped—he was ruined. To help his old friend, Li had purchased all Emanuel’s assets including Kingsclere, her mansion home. But Li’s assistance came at a price. Emanuel would have to leave for good.

Pearl had listened in rigid silence before rushing back to Kingsclere, climbing the grand staircase, and searching every room. When it became clear that the news was true, she ordered Gum-ghee to fetch a hammer, wood, nails and padlocks.

She could not bear to receive anyone’s condolences or hear their vapid platitudes or see their looks of pity. Instead, she marooned herself in her rooms. And though it ripped her heart to shreds, she even refused to let her daughter Leah Felicie see her in such a state of humiliation, of confusion and of rage.

Nor were the servants permitted within sight. Gum-ghee saw to that, instructing her staff to lower their eyes and keep their distance. A pall of fear coursed through Kingsclere giving the mansion a tense, brittle quality as though its denizens had just survived an earthquake and were bracing themselves for the aftershock.

Pearl slept all day, rising after dark to pick at the same dish that appeared on a tray in her bedroom: yeow jia gwei, oil-fried devils—shaped to resemble bones—made of dough and deep fried. Tearing off a piece, she dipped it in sugar, stuffed her mouth and washed it down with gunpowder tea. Then she lit a lantern, prowled the halls to the battened doors and checked the locks, running her fingers over the wax seals. Satisfied, she walked downstairs, out the front door, across the lawn to the edge of the property. There, sitting on a wicker chair in the gazebo, she gazed at the ornamental harbour that lay under a canopy of stars.

Gum-ghee kept a respectable distance waiting patiently for Pearl to come to her senses, wisely reading her mistress’s mood and tossing in an opinion only at the appropriate moment.

“It is said your father, Master Li, purchased this house to ensure you would be secure for life. A woman without property is fish without water,” she whispered one night. By saying this, Gum-ghee informed her mistress of the gossip coursing through the city and at the same time suggested that Pearl’s cup was half full. But for Pearl, it wasn’t about the restoration of Kingsclere to her sole ownership or about having financial security—her father was one of the richest men in the city—it was about something deeper and more personal.

“He betrayed me,” Pearl murmured.

“Your father? How? How is looking out for you a betrayal?”

“He knew of Emanuel’s plans to abandon me. He should have told me.”

Gum-ghee had no rebuttal. But nor could she allow her mistress to behave so childishly. They had known each other since she was thirteen and Pearl twelve. Master Li had hired Gum-ghee, a country girl, to look after his daughter and ever since she arrived, decades ago, she had rarely left her mistress’s side. But she did so that night and strode back to the house, leaving Pearl sitting alone in the gazebo staring into space.

How did this come to pass, Pearl wondered? Was this the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob testing her? Testing for what? No, the hurt felt more sinister, more personal. She pulled her knees up to her chest, hugged her legs and rocked back and forth. It could have been an hour or more or perhaps less before Gum-ghee reappeared and hauled Pearl off the chair. Holding her tight, half frog-marching half dragging, she heaved the smaller woman towards the house. Sputtering threats to terminate her employee or worse, to have the vile servant strangled and left to hang on the limb of a tree for crows to pluck out her eyes, Pearl’s vitriol did nothing to blunt Gum-ghee’s purpose. Her mistress had refused to bathe since her husband’s desertion, and her musk covered her like a dung beetle’s carapace. Up the stairs and down the hall they went. Gum-ghee kicked the bathroom door open. In one fluid motion, she pulled off her mistress’s nightgown, tossed her into the steaming tub and held her head underwater, Pearl surfaced and screamed with such ferocity that bluish veins stood out on her forehead. Gum-ghee reared back, lost her balance and fell on her bottom, watching helplessly as her mistress screeched with fury. Eventually, exhausted by her own tantrum, Pearl stopped, looked at her handmaid and whimpered.

“Your daughter needs you. And Master Li too,” Gum-ghee said gently.

Pearl nodded and gave herself up to her handmaid’s care. Gum-ghee bathed her mistress, towelled her dry and helped her into a fresh nightshirt, then tucked her into bed. As Pearl sank into the fresh, downy sheets, her thoughts turned to Semah— that limping Goliath. After all they had been through together. Pearl shook her head sadly.

Emanuel and Pearl had lived happily at Kingsclere until his first wife Semah arrived unannounced from Calcutta. Pearl remembered losing face when Emanuel let that woman stay, dividing the house into the East Wing where Pearl lived and the West Wing for Semah. She recalled their rivalry for Emanuel’s attention, their competition to produce an heir and the joy when their children were born. Semah’s David and Pearl’s Leah Felicie bridged the gulf between the two wives. She felt a bittersweet smile remembering David’s sudden death at sixteen and how that tragedy vanquished their animosity and forged a new bond based on mutual support and trust.

But recent events blew that to bits. Pearl tightened her eyeballs and shook off the sentimental musings. Instead, she imagined the exiled woman sitting at a tiny desk in her pokey little room at the King Edward Hotel—a barely respectable inn—composing letters and dispatching her manservant, the Sikh, to deliver them each week for the last three weeks. Whenever he arrived, Gum-ghee pulled a handkerchief from the side-buttons of her tunic to cover her nose and mouth against the noxious fumes she believed were emanating from the Indian. Without a word, she took the letter from his opened palms and slammed shut the front door. Then, dangling

the thing between her forefinger and thumb—a dead rat held by the tail—she delivered the envelope to her mistress.

Pearl recognized the handwriting, sucked her teeth, tossed it into a drawer of her escritoire and locked it. Only then did Gum- ghee remove the mask from her face.

Kingsclere's matriarch enjoyed having the upper hand living in a mansion that had an impressive view of the labyrinthine streets of Central District. She especially enjoyed looking down on the King Edward Hotel, a fitting hole where liars go to die.