

SETTING: SHANGHAI, 1931

ALL DIALOGUE SPOKEN IN MANDARIN UNLESS OTHERWISE INDICATED.

OVER BLACK

NARRATOR

There is an old saying...

1

EXT. SHANGHAI STREETS - NIGHT

1

Through crowded streets LI (12), dressed in rags and clutching a bundle of personal possessions, is shoved then dragged then shoved again, roughly guided ever forward by a faceless MAN gripping her sleeve.

NARRATOR

"Eight saintly daughters are not equal to a boy with a limp"...

The Man pulls Li from the main street, through an alley where an UNDERTAKER (50s) loads a dead body wrapped in a white sheet onto a wooden cart pulled by a BOY (14). Li and the Man emerge onto a narrower but equally populated street where they are nearly knocked down by a STREET URCHIN, not much older than Li dashing out of a market, followed by a SHOP OWNER (60s).

NARRATOR (CONT'D)

Do you think that's true?

The Street Urchin is captured by three POLICE MEN who are obviously drunk and off-duty, their uniform shirts unbuttoned at the top and sleeves rolled up to the elbow.

NARRATOR (CONT'D)

I've known all sorts of men, boys too.

The Police Men laugh as they encircle and harass the Street Urchin. The Shop Owner, howls and swears and slaps at the Street Urchin and the Police Men, distracting the Police Men long enough for the Urchin to escape.

NARRATOR (CONT'D)

Some of them had limps, some worse.

The Police Men laugh their way into the open arms of PROSTITUTES that tug and catcall at every passerby, including the Man and Li. The Man bats the Prostitutes away but the Police Men allow themselves to be swallowed.

The Man pulls Li around another corner into:

2 EXT. SEA OF PEARLS, ALLEY - CONTINUOUS 2

Under a bare light bulb a red door vibrates with the sound of loud music coming from behind it.

NARRATOR

*I even knew a dwarf once. A sailor
with big hands and a voice like a
lamb.*

The Man knocks at the door and AMAH (70s), the housekeeper of the Sea of Pearls, opens it. She gives the two of them the eye, leaves for a brief second, then returns with MADAME OUYANG (40s), an aged beauty with hard lines cut into her face.

Madame Ouyang examines Li's face, rubbing at the dirt on her cheek, prying open her mouth with a thumb and examining her teeth.

Madame Ouyang nods with approval and Amah puts an arm around Li and shuttles her through-

3 INT. SEA OF PEARLS, KITCHEN - CONTINUOUS 3

NARRATOR

*Trust me, you see all sorts around
here.*

Li briefly catches a glimpse of a FAT MAN (60s), sitting shirtless beside steaming pots, fanning his belly with a paper fan, before she is pushed into-

4 INT. SEA OF PEARLS, DANCE FLOOR - CONTINUOUS 4

The main room of the Sea of Pearls, a smoky and crowded dance hall with a small stage where a TRIO OF RUSSIAN MUSICIANS bang and creak out tunes, while girls fawn over customers of all stripes. Tables line one side of the dance hall--home to card games, mahjong and illicit conspiracies.

NARRATOR

*But I never in all my life met a
"saintly daughter".*

Li's eye is caught by, FEI (17), elegantly dressed, laughing at the bar flanked by two TUXEDO'ED MEN.

As one of the Tuxedo'ed Men takes Fei by the hand and leads her to the dance floor she passes by Li. The two lock eyes for a moment before Amah pushes Li forward.

NARRATOR (CONT'D)

This isn't that kind of place.

Fei watches Li as she ascends the stairs.

CUT TO:

TITLE OVER BLACK

5 LI'S ROOM - LATER

5

Li, freshly washed, sits in a dark room lit only by a vanity mirror. She stares idly out of the window as Fei pulls off her robe and on a dress over her head.

FEI

Can you dance?

LI

No.

Fei leads Li to the vanity mirror then hangs up the robe.

FEI

Don't worry. We do two things here
but you really only have to be good
at one of them.

Li picks up the makeup and begins to put it on in heavy, unpracticed strokes around her eye.

Fei takes the makeup from Li's hand and sets it back down.

LI

Shouldn't I look beautiful?

FEI

You should look young. That is what
he wants.

Fei wipes at Li's excessive eye makeup. It smears a black circle around Li's eye.

Fei curses under her breath and wipes at it harder. Li stops her.

LI
I'm not afraid.

FEI
Yes, you look very brave.

There is a KNOCK, and Madame Ouyang enters.

MADAME OUYANG
Ready?

Fei and Li turn around. Madam Ouyang gasps at the dark circle around Li's eye.

MADAME OUYANG (CONT'D)
What have you done to her eye?

FEI
No, it's just makeup. See?

Fei wipes at Li's eye and the makeup comes off.

Madame Ouyang slaps Fei hard.

Li looks up at Fei, petrified. Madame Ouyang gently takes Li by the chin and coos to her in a calming tone.

MADAME OUYANG
No, no. Look at me. He has come special for you. Understand? Paid extra for you. You do want to please him, don't you?

Li nods.

MADAME OUYANG (CONT'D)
That's right.
(sharply to Fei)
Finish getting her ready. The longer he waits, the worse it will be for her.

Madame Ouyang leaves.

Fei begins to wipe away Li's makeup but Li collapses into her. Fei pushes Li back up.

Fei removes her necklace and puts it around Li's neck.

FEI
You're not afraid are you?

Li shakes her head.

FEI (CONT'D)
I didn't think so.

6 STAIRS - LATER

6

Fei moves down the stairs to the dance floor as Madame Ouyang comes up the stairs. Madame Ouyang gives Fei a questioning look and Fei nods "yes."

Coming up the stairs behind Madame Ouyang is OFFICER COURTIAUD (30s), heavy-set and French; the shirtsleeves of his uniform are rolled up to reveal his large, rough hands.

Officer Courtiaud braces himself between the banister and the wall to steady his drunken swagger.

Fei tries to slip under one of Courtiaud's arms but he wraps around her.

Fei gives him a polite smile (belying her disgust). There is nothing behind his eyes, and his mouth which he breaths heavily through, glistens excessively wet.

MADAME OUYANG
(in French)
Ah, ah! Officer Courtiaud, your
flower awaits you. This way!

Courtiaud slackens his hold and Fei pushes free.

Fei watches with concern as Courtiaud lumbers heavily up the stairs.

Someone from the dance floor calls Fei's name and instinctively she turns and smiles.

7 DANCE FLOOR - LATER

7

Fei sits at the bar with a YOUNG SAILOR who fawns over her, caressing her arm. Fei laughs.

Fei leans in close to the Young Sailor and whispers something into his ear. His eyes go wide and he pulls her closer.

Out of the corner of her eye Fei sees BAO YU (15) run down the stairs and grab Madame Ouyang, who entertains a group of men at a table. Bao Yu whispers breathlessly to Madame Ouyang then they both hurry back up the stairs.

Fei breaks free of the Sailor and pushes through the dance floor and up the stairs after them.

8 HALLWAY - CONTINUOUS

8

The loud commotion of furniture being thrown about is audible from Li's room. Madame Ouyang is already at the door, banging. As Fei reaches the top of the stairs Officer Courtiaud SCREAMS in pain. Fei runs toward the room.

MADAME OUYANG
Officer Courtiaud! Please open-

A GUNSHOT, unmistakable, rings out, halting Fei halfway between the Li's room and the staircase.

Madame Ouyang ducks to the floor and cries out.

Around the hallway YOUNG GIRLS and their CUSTOMERS poke their heads out of their rooms to see what's going on.

The door to Li's room bursts open and out stumbles Officer Courtiaud, clutching his bloody cheek with one hand, his pistol in the other.

OFFICER COURTIAUD
(in French)
She fucking bit me!

Madame Ouyang covers her face and cries out.

Officer Courtiaud, drunk and dazed and screaming, lurches toward Fei, hand clutching his bloody face. She is frozen in place with astonishment.

He squeezes off another shot from the pistol haphazardly into the air before tripping and falling forward with a thud.

The pistol goes skidding down the hallway.

The Young Girls all shriek and disappear back into their rooms.

Fei regains herself and runs past the writhing and moaning Officer Courtiaud, and into-

9 LI'S ROOM - CONTINUOUS

9

The room is a shambles and at first it looks like Li isn't there. But Fei spots Li's small hand sticking up from the other side of the bed, almost beckoning Fei forward.

Fei rushes to her but is halted by the sight.

Li's mouth is covered in blood, her clothes are torn. Three inches below her collar bone there is a neat, black bullet hole framed by pristine white flesh. The pool of blood beneath Li is already deep and spread wide.

Fei drops to her knees and gathers the girl in her arms.

10

EXT. SEA OF PEARLS BACK ALLEY - LATER

10

The Boy stands guard over a wooden pushcart with a lamp hanging from the corner. The Boy stares at Fei.

Fei, her arms and dress caked dark with blood, smokes a cigarette beside the red back alley door.

The door opens and the old Undertaker emerges. Li's body is cradled in his arms, wrapped in a white sheet and impossibly small.

The boy springs into action, running around the cart and pulling the covering back. The Undertaker puts the body in the cart, at the top of the pile of bodies.

The Undertaker pauses, seeing Fei for the first time.

UNDERTAKER

Are you hurt?

Fei looks at him for a long while then throws her cigarette out and goes back inside.

The Undertaker watches the door close then grabs the lamp and trundles off. The boy grabs the yoke of the cart and wheels after him.

EXT. SEA OF PEARLS, COURTYARD - LATER

Fei looks down into the courtyard below her window as two officers drag Officer Courtiaud out of the dancehall.

Madame Ouyang follows behind, dancing around them, pleading.

MADAME OUYANG

No harm done, officers. Please, we don't want any trouble. Bring him back when he's feeling up to it. Free drinks and dances and girls-

11 INT. FEI'S ROOM - CONTINUOUS

11

Fei closes the window and removes her blood-soaked dress. There is a KNOCK on her door.

Bao Yu enters with a basin of water.

BAO YU
Madame Ouyang says you are to come
back down stairs.

Fei sits at the table and begins to wipe away the blood from her face.

FEI
Tell her I'll be down in a moment.

Bao Yu doesn't move. Fei looks up at her. Bao Yu places a red scarf on the dressing table with a THUD.

Fei picks up the scarf and shoots a surprised look at Bao Yu. Bao Yu returns the look with intensity.

BAO YU
What was she like?

FEI
She was like us.

BAO YU
I thought so.

Bao Yu leaves.

Fei turns back to the scarf. She slides her hand between its folds and withdraws Courtyaud's pistol.

She holds it up for a moment, feeling its weight, when she hears hideous laughter in the hallway.

Fei quickly wraps the gun back in the scarf and hides it beneath her mattress.

12 INT. UNDERTAKER'S BACK ROOM - LATER

12

Between two bodies, motionless on a long table, The Undertaker, with the aide of The Boy, strips western-style suit jacket off of a third corpse.

UNDERTAKER
(gesturing to markings
around the corpse's neck)
Hanged himself.
(MORE)

UNDERTAKER (CONT'D)

The jacket and shirt can be saved
but the pants... no good. What size
shoe is he?

There is KNOCK and the two look up to see Fei standing in the doorway.

13

INT. UNDERTAKER'S OFFICE - MOMENTS LATER

13

The Undertaker's Office looks like the inside of a pawnshop, a repository of knickknacks and detritus taken from the pockets and persons of collected bodies.

The Undertaker lays down Fei's necklace on the table before Fei, who drinks tea. He sits and packs a pipe, lights it.

Fei picks up the necklace and kneads it between her fingers.

FEI

What will you do with her ashes?

The Undertaker shrugs and takes a long drag from the pipe.

UNDERTAKER

You should run away. That place
isn't for a girl like you.

FEI

And what sort of girl is it for?

UNDERTAKER

You could go to the church.

FEI

Ha! I might as well stay here with
you and the stiffs.

UNDERTAKER

It's not a bad idea. The boy is a
terrible cook.

They both laugh.

FEI

I'm going to kill him.

The Undertaker laughs harder.

UNDERTAKER

Oh, he isn't that bad.

Fei becomes quiet.

FEI
No, the police officer.

UNDERTAKER
Oh.

They sit in silence for a moment.

FEI
Tell me I look brave.

UNDERTAKER
You can't save those other girls.

Fei sets down her tea and looks at the Undertaker.

FEI
Tell me I look brave.

The Undertaker looks away and laughs to himself.

UNDERTAKER
You know, next to yours, mine is
the busiest business in Shanghai.
I'm not handsome or strong, but I
have money. I could be good to you.

Fei rises and gives the Undertaker a kiss on the cheek, then
leaves.

14 INT. FEI'S ROOM - DAWN

14

Fei climbs back into her window.

MADAME OUYANG (O.S.)
Does he love you?

Fei falls back against the wall.

Madame Ouyang sits on a chair in the corner of the room, a
bottle of wine in her hand. She is DRUNK.

Fei regains her composure and begins to undress.

FEI
Who?

MADAME OUYANG
Whatever idiot you left to see. I
should send you to work on the
docks.

FEI

No, he doesn't love me.

Madame Ouyang takes a big drink and chortles and walks to where Fei is seated.

MADAME OUYANG

Of course not! No man ever loved a woman, only how she made him feel about himself. Women are just too stupid to tell the difference.

FEI

Except you.

MADAME OUYANG

And you, Fei.

Madame Ouyang gets on her knees before Fei and opens the top of her robe, revealing a jagged scar that starts at one side of her neck, dips down around the curve of her throat and ends at her shoulder.

Madame Ouyang takes Fei's hand and presses it to her scar.

MADAME OUYANG (CONT'D)

This is what we are.

Fei pulls her hand back but Madame Ouyang won't let it go.

MADAME OUYANG (CONT'D)

He only did to that girl what every man will do to every woman in the end.

Fei collapses into the arms of Madame Ouyang. The Madame holds her for a moment then stands and closes her robe.

She leaves.

15 LATER

15

Fei lies back on her bed, pressing her necklace to her lips and saying a silent prayer.

Officer Courtaud's pistol rests on the pillow beside her.

16 DANCE FLOOR - NIGHT

16

We follow Madame Ouyang through the club. She is all smiles.

The dance floor is in full swing as the band hammer their instruments.

At the bar men fall over themselves, over the girls, buying drink after drink.

At a booth toward the front of the bar a FAT WOMAN meeds out dance tickets to a crowd of sailors.

In one corner of the bar a group of old Chinese gangsters wearing western clothes play cards, young girls fawning over them.

At each place Madame Ouyang receives a wave or greeting and she joyfully reciprocates.

Fei dances with a foppish British Man but watches over his shoulder as Officer Courtiaud drinks at a table with two other officers.

As the song ends and the dancers clap for the band, Fei takes leave of the British Man and makes her way through the crowd toward Courtiaud.

The band starts up again, it's a real slow number.

As the dancers sway to the music, no one notices as Fei reaches into her dress and discretely pulls out Courtiaud's pistol, holding it down by her side.

Fei approaches Courtiaud and begins to raise the pistol but before she can reach him, a HAND grabs her wrist and pulls it behind her back.

Fei looks up: It's The Undertaker. He is dressed in the WESTERN SUIT he was pulling off of the corpse earlier (the pants do not match the jacket). The suit is ill-fitting and he's perspiring.

Fei jerks away but The Undertaker holds on, attempting to tear the gun from her hand. She gets her pinned hand free and brings it around and points it at his ribs, but he holds her closer. The gun is pinned between their bodies.

FEI

If you wanted a dance, you only had to ask.

UNDERTAKER

Come with me.

FEI

Oh, you want to go upstairs?

UNDERTAKER

No. Away from here.

Fei pushes away from the Undertaker but he holds onto her.

FEI

If you want me, you can have me upstairs. But I'm not going to be the undertaker's wife and I'm not leaving without him.

UNDERTAKER

Do you know what's going to happen if you kill him? They're going to shut this place down and put you all out. Where will you go then?

FEI

What does it matter to you? Either way you'll collect.

As the song ends and people begin to clap Fei and The Undertaker struggle for the gun. Suddenly a hand taps on the Undertaker's shoulder and Fei lets go of the gun and recoils.

The Undertaker turns around to see Officer Courtiaud standing over him, an uneven bandage on his face.

Courtiaud appears to be sober and even has a slight grin on his face.

OFFICER COURTIAUD

May I?

The Undertaker's hands fall to his side, concealing the gun.

Fei and the Undertaker both look at Officer Courtiaud.

OFFICER COURTIAUD (CONT'D)

(gesturing to Madame O)

Madame Ouyang tells me you are finest dancer in the Sea of Pearls.

Madame Ouyang nods at them from a table, where she is entertaining two other police officers.

OFFICER COURTIAUD (CONT'D)

Are you through with her?

Fei looks to the Undertaker, pleading, desperate.

The Undertaker bows his head and nods.

Fei's face hardens as she lets Officer Courtiaud sweep her away to the sounds of the rising music.

Fei looks over Courtiaud's shoulder at the Undertaker, who backs away defeated.

Madame Ouyang and the BOUNCER appear beside the Undertaker. The Bouncer grabs the Undertaker and the three of them head to the door.

MADAME OUYANG

Do not come back here. Understand?

The Undertaker watches over his shoulder as Officer Courtiaud leads Fei upstairs.

17 INT. UNDERTAKER'S OFFICE - NIGHT

17

The Undertaker sits alone smoking his pipe, staring at Courtiaud's pistol.

There is a KNOCK at the door.

Fei enters limply.

When she reaches the edge of the light he sees that there is a deep bruise under one of her eyes and blood in her nostrils and at the corner of her mouth.

The Undertaker runs to her and she collapses.

The Undertaker gathers her in his arms.

FEI

Will you still have me?

The Undertaker helps Fei to her feet.

18 EXT. SEA OF PEARLS, ALLEY - LATER

18

The Undertaker and Fei enter the alley, his arm around her.

At the red door the Undertaker stops Fei.

UNDERTAKER

Wait here for me.

Fei nods.

19 INT. SEA OF PEARLS - LATER

19

Madame Ouyang entertains police officers who drink and smoke and laugh.

The Undertaker appears at the table beside Madame Ouyang who quickly grabs his arm.

MADAME OUYANG

I told you not to come back here.

The Undertaker raises Courtiaud's pistol and points it at Courtiaud's laughing face.

BANG

A spray of blood spatters Madame Ouyang's face. She turns to look at Courtiaud, showing the clean side of her face to the Undertaker.

The other officers are stock-still and misted with blood as well. Courtiaud is slumped forward on the table, a splatter on the wall behind him.

Madame Ouyang screams.

The Undertaker turns and points the gun at Madame Ouyang but before he can pull the trigger he is tackled by the other police officers.

20 INT. FEI'S ROOM - SAME

20

Fei looks at her injured face in the mirror for a long time, a basin of water and a cloth beside her.

Two GUNSHOTS ring out from downstairs.

Mechanically, she dips the entire cloth into the basin, soaking it, then wrings it once and wipes hard at the bruise beneath her eye.

The bruise washes away easily, some if it dripping down her cheek.

Fei dips the cloth and wrings it again, dark eye makeup bleeds and drips into the basin.

She wipes again and it is completely gone.