



AMY
TAN

RULES *for*
VIRGINS

BYLINER FICTION



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Rules for Virgins

Wherein Magic Gourd advises young Violet on
how to become a popular courtesan while
avoiding cheapskates, false love, and suicide

* * *

Shanghai

1912

By Amy Tan

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Do you want to wear out your insides by the time you are sixteen? Of course not. Then learn these lessons well.

While you are still a virgin courtesan, you must know all the arts of enticement and master the balance of anticipation and reticence. Your defloration won't happen until the New Year, when you turn fifteen, and I expect you to have many ardent suitors by the time Madam is ready to sell your bud.

You might be thinking, "What does my attendant, old Magic Gourd, know about romance?" When I was nineteen, I was one of the Top Ten Beauties of Shanghai. And not too many courtesans last until they are thirty-two. So you see, I know more than most.

* * *

Reputation

Always remember, little Violet, you are creating a world of romance and illusion. When you play the zither, it should be the aching or joyous companion to your song-poem. Sing to your suitor as if no one else is in the room, as if it was fate that brought you two together at this moment, in this place. You cannot simply pluck the silk strings or let memorized words fall from your mouth. You might as well not play at all and just take the sedan directly to a brothel where no one bothers with illusions or preludes.

Most beauties learn only ten song-poems throughout their career. You will not be like most. You will be unusual. Over the next year, you will learn three melodies about mountain retreats, three rustic ballads about maidens and

young boys who meet in the mountains, three classic song-poems about returning from war and slaying tigers, one sing-speak tune to make guests laugh, one lively favorite for happy celebrations, and one farewell hymn about companions who will soon depart, which adds warmth at the end of a party and extends an invitation to get drunk together again.

You are an educated girl, so I know you are capable of learning quickly if you are disciplined. If you want to become one of the Top Ten Beauties of Shanghai, your repertoire must be large enough to choose a different song for each suitor who hosts a dinner in your honor. When you sing it to him, he will forget all other women. When it comes time for the public to vote for the Top Ten Beauties, guess which beauty out of all of the first-class houses will get the most votes? Each month, you will learn another song, and with each you must sound natural and honest, as if this song is flowing from your heart. I will accompany you on the zither until your warbled notes don't sound like two cats screeching over the same dead mouse.

We'll choose your song-poems carefully. Forget winter mountain poems, because they are always cold and bare in mood. But those having to do with spring thaw are fine, because they speak of renewal and abundance, the opposite of death and loneliness. Songs of summer yielding to autumn are acceptable, especially if they include the tasting of fruits your suitor enjoys. Make sure the fruit is not overly ripe, however, because that suggests worms will follow. The sounds of nesting swallows carry promise, but avoid any songs that have to do with the arrival of magpies or the departure of phoenixes, since they herald bad news and the retreat of life.

Later, when you are closer to your defloration, you will learn a few song-poems about the death of a beautiful girl. I know it seems strange to choose sad songs, but tragedy opens the aching heart and increases longing, passion, and

desperation. A man will do anything to remove regret and feel his loved one back in his arms. Even if he has never lost anyone he truly loved, he will want to lie next to you, to unite with your departed spirit, to revel once again at the peak of passion. The tips to attendants and maids are especially good when the songs are tragic, to say nothing of the gifts that will be placed at your goddess feet.

In time, we will add to your repertoire those song-poems that match each man's idea of his self-importance. Is he a scholar, a businessman, or a politician? These are songs you would perform for the host in front of his friends, and the more songs you know, the better you can sing praises not just to a scholar but to the president of a university, not just to a businessman but to the chief officer of Renji. There are many captains of industry; you need to know the nature of those industries. Occasionally, you might entertain the abbot of a temple. That one is easy: He loves songs for the gods. When sung with whispered intimacy, words sound true, and his chest will swell, knowing that others are there to hear these honest praises. The effect is the same for every man: He will feel more powerful, more virile, and in a conquering, generous mood, the more so if he has drunk plenty of wine. You must be attentive to filling the half-empty cup.

Madam said you will attend your first dinner party next week. It is not your formal debut. Madam wants you there so that gossip will reach the mosquito press. The buzzing of men who were at the party will make others eager to host debut parties night after night. But don't do anything that leads to stinging gossip. Why do you think it's called the mosquito press? Each party will breed more stories in the tabloids. How you behave next week can set the course of your career. I don't want you to act like a little girl, nor a seductress. And don't show off your fancy Western education or your smart opinions. If you laugh, cover your mouth. You never remember to do that. No man at this

party will want to see what's ugly inside of your mouth. If the older men are becoming impertinent, call them Grandpa. Some of those old men will try to pull you onto their laps. Bastards. If that happens, I will come quickly to you to say, "Mr. Wu on East Prosperity Road is waiting for us." I will always say that whenever I want to remove you from an undesirable situation. Don't be stupid and ask me who Mr. Wu is.

The first party is for an important man named Forthright Fang. I don't know why he is so important, but he is hosting a big banquet and wants two courtesans for each of eight men. So that tells you how important he is. It's good for you to start out at a rich man's party. You'll see just how fierce the competition will be. All four beauties of our house will be there and also those from other houses. He asked if our house had a virgin courtesan, and Madam was happy to say she had a new one, fresh and naive. He was pleased and said he liked a variety of ages, for interest. Maybe he has a special eye for virgins. Even so, don't try to charm him—Madam has her eye on him for Vermillion's husband. If you make slight mistakes of etiquette the first time, everyone will be forgiving. They may consider it proof that you are pure and innocent. If you are terribly clumsy, stupid, or haughty, there goes any chance of a comfortable life. You'll be lucky if Madam lets you stay on as a maid to pay your debt.

You may not be asked to do anything special, but don't think that means you don't have to do anything at all. First, you must observe and learn my cues. Greet the guests, ask the customer you are standing behind whether he desires more tea or a particular dish, and then let me know. I will bring what he ordered. I doubt the host will ask you to provide entertainment, since there will be several accomplished beauties who are popular in the storytelling halls, but I've been taken by surprise before, and it was unfortunate. Just in case, I have come up with a story you

can learn over the next week. You will tell it, while I accompany you on the zither.

The story is about eternal youth. If it is told in the right way, any man who hears it will wish to have your youth rub off on him. The actual rubbing, of course, will not happen until your defloration. With this story, you are creating a promise for the future. Immortality. The tale has been promising immortality for over a thousand years. It is called "Peach Blossom Spring," and even a child can recite some version of it.

Because it is an oft-told tale, you must use special talent in performing it. Lots of expression—sadness, wonder, surprise, genuine regret, and so forth. You pause here, look there, and move your eyes sideways to increase anticipation. In my younger years, many men said they had never felt closer to immortality than they did while listening to me. Even the other courtesans said so, and they are not ones to flatter another beauty, except insincerely.

My version went more or less like this: A poor fisherman falls asleep on his boat, which floats into a secret grotto. He emerges on the other side in a haven where people dress and speak in the style of a bygone era. The people are free of war and worry, hate and envy, sickness and old age. There is only one season, spring. The maidens are always virgins, the wine is always sweet, the peonies are always blooming. Standing on every hillside are trees whose branches are heavy with voluptuous peaches.

"What is this place?" the fisherman asks a young maiden, and she replies, "Peach Blossom Spring," and then pleasures him in ways he never imagined possible. ("With wine and song," you should say with innocence. Everyone will get a big laugh out of that.) Time does not pass in this heaven on earth. It renews itself, as does his insatiability. Eventually, he regains his senses, realizing that everyone back home must be worried sick about his absence. He sails for home laden with delicious meats and fruits for his

mother, father, and wife. He will tell his friends to come with him to this utopia. The boat is a leaky wreck by the time he reaches his hometown. Half the village has burned down, the pagoda has collapsed, and the people are frightened by his long, matted beard and hair. He learns that two hundred years have passed, three civil wars have been lost, and his family and friends are long dead. Sadly, he returns to his boat and sails back toward the grotto. Many years pass, and he is still sailing, unable to find Peach Blossom Spring.

That is the story everyone knows, but I like to add on a happy ending. It goes like this: The fisherman is about to drown himself when he spots the same pretty maiden on the riverbank, eating a peach so enormous she has to use both hands to bring it to her cherry lips. She waves to him, and together they sail through the grotto to Peach Blossom Spring. Nothing has changed. The maidens. The peach trees. The weather. The contentedness. The fisherman is again young and handsome—and, of course, looks remarkably like the host of the party.

The maiden looks like you.

When I recited this ending, I mentioned the erotic pleasures the lucky man would enjoy. Everyone knows them. Swimming with Goldfish, Tasting the Watermelon, Climbing Higher on the Peach Tree. Often they were the ones I already knew that the host loved. But of course you should not include these details while you are still a virgin courtesan. Maybe next year. As I accompany you on the zither, my playing will help you know what you say next: a bit of glissando to signal the surprise arrival, tremolo for mounting passion, a sweep over all twenty-one silk strings for the return to the past. During the next week, I will train you to deliver every word with precise gestures of your face and body while still looking natural and spontaneous, as if the story is unfolding before you, as if all your emotions are genuine and unexpected. You will learn to use

an innocent girl's melodious voice, with its sweet trills up and down, its hesitant pace, or a mounting rush of pleasurable release.

There is another quality to a superior performance. Some girls perform without emotion, with mere skill. They may be masters of technique, but they wear a frown of concentration. I call that style "Looking at the Arrow and Not the Target." So boring. After three minutes, the men are hoping the story will soon end so they can return to a more boisterous evening.

Another style is called "Plucking Your Own Heartstrings." That kind of beauty closes her eyes and appears to be caught in another world. Her face beams with pleasure, and she might raise her eyebrows a little or smile to herself to show she is pleased with the way she is playing the music. So conceited.

I call the third style "Floating Together in Ravishment." This is the one you will learn. Think of the story as I tell you what to do. Follow what I do. Your eyes are partly open, your lids still weighted by dreams, and as they drift to take in the surroundings, they meet your host's. Look at him fully with a longing gaze. Then let your eyelids fall halfway closed again, as if you have entered paradise together. Let your mouth relax, your lips part. Keep your eyes on him as your face flushes with uncontrolled pleasure. Suddenly, you gasp softly and you show uncertainty—not a frown or a grimace, but a questioning look that changes to acceptance of fate. With this dream of him in your eyes, you are being swept away. You're an innocent girl, a little frightened because you don't know where you are going. Close your eyes, breathe quickly, warble uncontrollably to match the zither's tremolo. Then close your eyes and say, "Ah!" with ecstasy that devastates your senses. That means you should wear a slightly painful expression, as if you have died, but it's a small pain, a temporary death, so don't move for a few seconds. (No, goose head, it does not actually hurt.)

Finally, let your face relax, and when your dreamy eyes meet his, he won't be able to loosen his purse strings fast enough in hopes he'll win your defloration.

Understand that the story of Peach Blossom Spring is not simply about the desire for immortality. It is about the secret place in a man's past that now eludes him, the place where he felt the most alive. When he thinks of it, he feels his life is barren and lonely. He is sentimental, regretful, and keenly aware of elapsed years.

His nostalgia may be for a lurid episode from the days of his youth. That is typical. What romance did a married cousin initiate? Or was it an older boy who seduced him? What did he see when he wet his finger and made a hole in his young aunt's paper window? Was she with his uncle, his father, or a boy his age? What did she do when she caught him? Did she punish him? Did he enjoy his punishment? What erotic memory does he now rely on to reach the heights?

Remember also that a grown man may have nostalgia for his ideal self. He was supposed to leave a legacy of high morals so his descendants would worship him for the lofty reputation he built. Few men are capable of preserving their ideal self. If he is a scholar, what philosophical principles were sacrificed to ambition? If he is a banker, what oath of honesty was dirtied by favors? If he is a politician, what civic-minded policies were destroyed by bribes? You must cultivate his sentimentality for moral glory and help him treasure his myth of who he was. And when you do, he will not be able to let you go for at least a season or two.

You are too young to know yet what nostalgia truly means. It takes time to become sentimental. But for the sake of your success, you must quickly learn. When you touch a man's nostalgia, he is yours.

* * *

Patrons and Cheapskates

As a courtesan, you must work toward the Four Necessities: jewelry, furniture, a seasonal contract with a stipend, and a comfortable retirement. Forget about love. You will receive that many times, but none of it is lasting. You can't eat it, even if it leads to marriage. And unless you become famous, you would become another of many concubines, and eat whatever the man's wife chooses. When you think of retirement, consider what will still provide a small bit of the freedom you now enjoy. You could do no better than to be the madam of a house like your mother's. You may hate her now, but that has nothing to do with your freedom and comfort in later years.

To gain the Four Necessities, you must be popular, desired by many suitors who give you costly gifts. You must be as clearheaded, firm, shrewd, and quick-thinking as a businessman. You offer no bargains, and you never accept anything less than what you are worth. I will let you know what that is after the first year of your defloration. If you do not follow my advice, you will lower your value, and even my efforts may not be enough to lift it up again.

My duty is to increase the competition among suitors before Madam decides who will enjoy the privilege of deflowering you. I will attend all your parties, all your calls to other houses. I will hint to your suitors that you have others vying for your favor, and I may mention the gift you are wearing, a hairpin of diamonds, a ring of imperial green jade—each week jewelry that is a bit more valuable. These are things I may have to loan you. I might say that your favorite color is green, and thus jade and emeralds are your favored jewels. Do not contradict me and say you love pink.

That kind of truthfulness is stupidity and will lead to gifts of flowers. Some suitors must be drawn in gradually, no matter how wealthy. Even the wealthiest man may have had frugal beginnings. Habits remain. When he has provided enough gifts to prove his sincerity, I will prepare the boudoir and let him know he is welcome to have tea with you after the party. Only serious suitors will be invited—and for tea only, perhaps a song. They'll see a hint of the inner chambers where they might lose their minds.

We will develop a language between us, using our eyes and eyebrows, the small movements of our fingers on fans and collars. You will know when to be subtle so I can be clear. When I mention Mr. Wu's party, I am taking you away. When I mention Mr. Lu on Pebble Road, you will know that the man who is eyeing you is Vermillion's suitor. I will single out men of generosity. When a man's desire for you increases, so will his gifts. When gifts increase, so does your worth, and when your worth increases, so will the favors Madam bestows. Bring in a rich patron and she will call you Daughter. When you have no patron, no suitors, and no callers of any kind, she will declare you a parasite and threaten to kick you out.

I tell you these things so you can avoid the pain of truth later. Our world is full of temporary promises and guile. It is necessarily so. We are not evil people, this is just how we survive. There are only a few steps that separate success from failure. Understand this and you will not suffer from disillusionment as often as I did.

You will have favorites among the suitors for your bud: the charming ones, the handsome ones. I will try to nurture those. But the madam will choose whoever she feels is the best for your defloration, the one who offers the most. If it is a man whom you find distasteful, I will ask Madam to let you have a little fun with the next. That way, if a man is odious, you'll remember that better is yet to come.

Just remember, the first week is the most profitable. After that, you're no longer a virgin. Interest in you falls, the gifts are less. That always happens to young beauties. Once they've sold their inexperience, no one wants the rest of their inexperience. But you will surprise everyone. That's what I'm teaching you: to use your brain as cleverly as you use your hips and mouth.

In the House of Vermillion, all the hosts for parties and dinners will be rich, just as they were at Hidden Jade Path. The guests of hosts—maybe they are, maybe not. That's where my skills come in. I can quickly find out. Since we're part of a new flower house, we must depend at first on Vermillion's fame and following of admirers to establish its reputation as first-class. So never steal her patrons or I'll hand you the silken cord so you can hang yourself. News of the House of Vermillion has already been reported in the mosquito press, and the madam will ensure that there is more to come. The tabloids love exciting gossip—and scandal even more. There's always some story about a bumpkin who claims he was fleeced by a dishonest courtesan. I think most of these accusers are simply cheapskates who thought they could throw down a Mexican dollar and get their stem caressed just as they did by a cheap whore at an opium flower house. Or they think that love in a courtesan house is truly love, and they claim later they were betrayed. But some courtesans are genuine connivers. And if they are caught, that spells the end of their career in Shanghai. They would have to move to another province to attract unsuspecting clients. I despise their kind. They make men think all flowers are pickpockets of the heart. You won't find any courtesans like that in this house, so don't you become one.

I will get you off to a quick start by spreading good rumors in the tabloids. The editor of the most popular mosquito daily is a former lover of mine, and because I did not charge him for many of our trysts, I can ask him to put

in a favorable word. We may have to make something up in the beginning. "A well-known shipping magnate said that the virgin courtesan at the House of Vermillion is worth an early look-see before she makes her official debut." That will add intrigue as well as make it clear that you are with a first-class house, not the kind that charges one dollar for this, two dollars for that. That's what the old bustard did, and it lowered us to a second-class house and encouraged customers to bargain for sex. Here, we don't go back and forth on the price. It is three dollars for a party, and it does not include riding on the stem. No argument.

The extras at the House of Vermillion will cost slightly more than most places. Your mother did the same, and it is a good strategy. If the prices are higher and the beauties are higher-class, a man feels all the more privileged. Vermillion has stocked French wine and special virility mushrooms. A good host would never deny his guests the fine wine just recommended by his courtesan. But she should never make the cost of saving face so high that a man must go elsewhere to show how generous he is. One man reviled a greedy house to the press, and as a result the house lost most of its business and had to close so it could start a new life under a different name. The man's factory later burned down, and, fortunately for the reincarnated house, no one could prove the disaster was related to a grudge.

At the party next week, there will be two beauties to stand behind each guest. The host of the party or Madam will make those arrangements. Whichever man you are assigned, keep in mind that he has no special rights to you. If he tries to sneak a hand onto your leg, move back, and apologize for being too close. Even so, you should be attentive to his needs—more wine, more tea. They expect to be pampered, and other men will notice if you are too lazy to do so. If he is playing the Finger Guessing game with the

other men and he loses, he may give the penalty cup of wine to a beauty to drink.

I know that often happened in your mother's house. But do you know why? Why does the man not enjoy the wine himself? To stay clearheaded while gambling? No, he enjoys having a woman take the punishment for him. After all, a little cup of wine is not like a beating. But it weakens her a little, makes her drunk so she loses her calculating ways, especially in the boudoir. That's what they think, anyway. They don't know how cunning we are. When the beauty accepts the cup, the beauty next to her exchanges it for an empty one, then empties the wine into a vase. Have you ever wondered why there are so many vases and spittoons about the place? Do you now see why it is unwise to make enemies with the other beauties of the house? You should practice this sleight of hand many times. I don't want you drunk and sick. That would make a lasting impression of the worst kind.

To entice a guest with your eyes, wait until the man stares at you. Look past his gaze before returning your eyes for only a moment. As the night progresses, let your eyes linger, longer each time, and let your smile grow, so his confidence does as well. Forget that demure technique of casting the eyes downward and pretending to be flustered. That may have worked ten years ago. These days, fake coyness just makes a man confused. You don't have to be brazen, but your meaning should be clear. Some of my clients reached the heights through eyes alone. You think that's victory? Ha. Once the stem shrinks to normal, the man is no longer urgent. He's content to go home.

Watch out for cheapskates. They may come as guests of the host. A country cousin, an old schoolmate, the kind who's used to second-class houses or worse. You can tell who they are because they don't know the rules. They woo courtesans who already have patrons. They think they can bed a beauty the first night. They don't bother to tip

attendants or maids. That's the worst. I'll be quick to excuse you from such parties, announcing that you have a call chit for a party hosted by the ever-useful Mr. Wu on East Prosperity Road. But some of the cheapskates may be newly rich and don't know our customs. For those I have a pamphlet, which many beauties use: Li Shang-Yin's "Advice to Men Visiting Brothels." Tried-and-true for hundreds of years. *A man should not brag about the size of his stem. He should not make false promises. He should not piss in front of the courtesan.* And so on. I added that a man should give generous tips to maids and attendants. Why not? It saves everyone time and embarrassment.

The guests to really watch out for are tagalongs who are disreputable. Some of them have manners of the highborn, but they've gambled away their family's wealth. Or they burned it up into opium smoke. They come bearing jewelry they've stolen from their mothers or sisters or wives. (Nothing would follow after they've disbursed those.) Worse are thieves who took jewelry from the boudoirs of beauties they lured with their lies. They carry stolen bracelets and rings from one house to the next. A friend of mine lost her entire retirement savings to just such a thief. We all thought he should have had his stem cut off and fed to the dogs, and the madam of the house thought so, too. She hired gangsters to track him down, and let's just say that they fed that dog much more than his stem. I will always be on the lookout for scoundrels and thieves. If I steer you away from a man, that may be the reason. Never question what I do or you'll be fucking thugs and their friends as repayment for the help you didn't want.

There are tempting young men—rich, handsome, but spoiled and heartless, too. They show off to their friends. They toss out gifts—jeweled hairpins to this flower, bracelets to that one. They woo so passionately that the beauties vie among themselves to have them stay the night. Those beauties dream of making them their patrons. They

give them everything in one night, but the next day those young men are courting another. They want only to trample as many flowers as they can. They compete and brag about how little time it took. They describe the pudendum, as proof they entered her gates. This is why I require a courtship of no less than a month. You may have only three or four intimate suitors during this period, and only those who might become patrons. These three or four will keep you busy enough.

There is another kind of suitor I will help you avoid. They are like stallions and never seem to exhaust themselves. As soon as they're done, they're ready to mount you again. With them, you will have no strength to rise in time to take tea with the first-time guests, the new opportunities. You will not look your best when you take carriage rides. And you know what the mosquito press will say. Is the flower Violet wilting and about to fall?

A man's manners may be impeccable until he is in your bed. There is a type who thinks he can order up any kind of sex, like dishes on a menu. He brings his pillow book to ask for the outlandish positions he's illustrated in the back. It's one thing to lash a beauty's arms to the high corner of the bed and quite another to hang her upside down like a monkey from the chandelier. They don't care if the chandelier crashes down or an arm is twisted loose from its socket. I know of one girl who fell on her head, and afterwards she put her clothes on backwards and never said two words that made any sense. The house couldn't keep her, and I don't know where she went.

The most dangerous is the Lover of Blood-Curdling Screams. He would just as soon fuck a pig and your mother. Most of those men go to streetwalkers. But the wealthy ones can afford to torture even a famous beauty. He loves to give a woman pain—and it does not come from a few slaps on the buttocks. The conceited girls are his favorite. They refuse him at first and are lured by his money. The

innocent ones are entranced from the start. He can only be satisfied when he sees a beauty's eye bulge when she has no breath to cry out for help. A few years ago, that happened to a courtesan in the House of Vitality. She was young and naive, like you, only seventeen. She knew everything—no one could tell her what to do. The demon encouraged her haughtiness. He asked to be her humble servant. He came laden with gifts and threw a banquet in her honor. The attendant invited him into the beauty's boudoir. In the morning, the attendant found her dead and went insane. I won't describe what the monster did. I can already see you're sufficiently scared.

The suitors I'll find for you will treat you like a lily made of white jade. A few will even be so overly polite you'll be bored to tears when they seek your permission for every peek and touch. Rich old men can be among the best suitors and patrons. They're experienced, generous, and they know how to tip. They enjoy adulation, but don't need praise all night long. You'll know who they are by how warmly I receive them. "Come sit here," I'll say, "your favorite spot by the window. Eat this, it's your favorite snack. Drink this wine, it makes you hearty. Violet will sing your favorite song." In the boudoir, they'll treat you like the Goddess of Mercy in a holy temple. They'll place offerings on your belly so that you might grant their stem a longer life. You may have to apply some herbs to get their stem to stand up, and the potions I have almost always work. Often he will simply fall asleep and dream of what he couldn't do. Tell him your dream of what he did. There is another good trait of old men: They are loyal. They won't chase after flowers, one after the next. They don't want to educate a new girl about their inabilities. The only problem with old men is that they die, sometimes suddenly. You may have one as your patron who gives you a handsome stipend. It's a sad day when you hear his sons are burning incense for

him at the family temple. You can be sure that his wife won't be toddling over with your stipend in hand.

With all these things, I will choose the very best suitors and patrons, who will go crazy to have you. My plan is to pay off your debt to Madam in three years or less. The furniture, clothes, and rent already come to two hundred fifty dollars. And that does not include your share of the food, the sedan, and the telephone. Once you're free, you can do as you please, as long as you pay the rent and give Madam a small portion. When your savings have mounted, we can rent our own house and start a business of our own. I already have one in mind.

For your defloration, I would like you to earn a full set of jewelry. Most beauties are happy with the usual two gold bangles and bolt of silk. If I have my way, you will receive much more than that. An expensive ring or necklace might be enough, but once he's in your room, I'll suggest that he celebrate by giving you the rest of the set. After your defloration, we'll need to work hard to accumulate more sets. We may have to rent jewelry from older courtesans who are hanging on and in need of cash. All those necklaces and bracelets will show future patrons how popular you already are. Once a man is your patron, always wear your most expensive set. Praise it lavishly, but add a small criticism. Tell him dark rubies do not flatter your complexion. Mention that the style is a little old-fashioned for a girl as young as you. Say that you saw a beauty who wore a more modern set, and that it showed what good taste her patron had. Now he has the opportunity to offer you jewelry more to your liking. If he says nothing, then that will be the last evening he comes to your boudoir until he offers a suitable form of admiration.

If he offers to take you to a jewelry store, let him know that Eight Virtues, on Felicity Lane, has the best selection and that they are also very honest and never claim that gold over silver is pure gold, unlike Eight Precious Garden,

over on Fourth Avenue. I know the owner of Eight Virtues, Mr. Gao, and he will have already set aside two sets, one quite expensive, the other not as expensive but also very nice. When you arrive, Mr. Gao will ask your suitor what he has in mind. If he does not ask for a specific piece of jewelry, Mr. Gao will bring out the expensive set—bracelet, necklace, ring, and hair ornament. You should murmur that if you had a set like that, you would no longer wear the jewelry you have now. If the suitor tells you to try it on, remove the jewelry you have on, throw it on the counter, and tell Mr. Gao to give it to the memorial fund for chaste widows. Don't worry, Mr. Gao will later come to the house and return the set. Now that you've discarded the other jewelry, what can your suitor do? He should buy the set you love so much to show he values you more than anyone, and since you value this set more than any other, the feeling is mutual. At the very least, he should buy a set worth a little more than the one you gave to the faithful widows. You cannot accept anything less.

Yet you also cannot appear greedy. You should not bargain with him. However, you can bargain with Mr. Gao on his behalf. Take off the necklace and examine it. Call attention to a flaw in one of the jewels, a little blur. Mr. Gao will look at it and acknowledge this with dismay and immediately offer a lower price. You can admit you still like the set but are not sure if it's the right thing to get. You should then ask your suitor what he thinks. Is it still worth it? Notice the way that question is phrased. You are not asking him to buy it; you are asking if it is worth the money. If he does not answer immediately, Mr. Gao will lower the price again, saying he does not want anybody saying his merchandise is flawed. He adds that he is willing to sell the set for such a small sum because you said you liked it more than anything you've ever had. And when others see it, you might tell them the same. They will also think you paid full price. So this is beneficial to all. At this point, your suitor

will likely buy it. After all, he's struck a bargain without even trying.

On the other hand, he could decline to buy the set, and now he has a reason to do so without losing face. The set is imperfect. You said so yourself. Ask Mr. Gao if there is anything similar in style that is without flaws. Mr. Gao will bring out the second set I selected. It will be less expensive than the first set but more than the discounted price. You can exclaim over this unbelievable price. If the suitor does not immediately say he will buy it, what does that mean? Whatever it means, so you do not lose face, look at the set again and find something else that is not to your liking that you had not noticed before. I will ask Mr. Gao if he will have new sets next week. He will say yes, and I will suggest we return. Then we can see what happens. You might be surprised.

One beauty told me that she was once confronted with a similar humiliating situation. She walked toward the door and tried for one last gift, stopping to admire a headband. It was decorated with small pearls and was expensive for a headband, but not extraordinarily so. The suitor said that it did not become her. She was disheartened and prepared to walk away empty-handed when the man called out to Mr. Gao to bring out the headband he had seen the other day. When she saw it, she wept. It was encrusted with large pearls and diamonds and more expensive than the entire first set of jewelry. Mr. Gao had been in on this ruse. The suitor knew how courtesans played the game, but he truly loved this beauty, and he showed her it was not her tricks that had won his heart. When he became her patron, he gave her enough money to pay off her debts and open a house of her own. She was more devoted to him than any wife could be, and when he died suddenly, she killed herself to be with him. None of his other wives did that.

As you can see, the strategies for winning a pledge from a patron must be carefully played. You don't want to return

home empty-handed too many times. That's why I should accompany you on any visits to the jewelry store. And until you get a top-quality headband, study the one Vermillion has. It is almost as nice as the one I told you about, studded with pearls and diamonds and shaped to enhance the roundness of her forehead and the angle of her phoenix eyes. You should openly admire the headband. Say aloud how precious it is. Praise the patron who bought it. She will appreciate your flattery, because it will show in front of other men how valuable she is and that the gifts from her future suitors should be equal in quality to her headband. Her patron will also be encouraged to give her another nice gift. One day, Vermillion will do the same for you. Your flattery will also give your suitors an idea of the sort of gift that could win your heart. As you grow in popularity, you should eventually receive a headband worth ten times more than the one I gave you.

My own fault lay in accepting something less. You are lucky you can benefit from my mistakes.

* * *

The Illusions

The illusion of romance depends on a man's willingness to believe, and his willingness comes from thwarted desires. All of your illusions should lead to one thing: to make him fall in love with you. If he does, time will stand still when he is with you. He will fancy himself immortal and be willing to give up his worldly goods for you.

A few men may wish for special illusions. I call one the Illusion of Tragic Love. Remember the songs I said you should learn? The one about maidens who died young? You might take on the role of a girl he grieves for, someone to

whom he secretly pledged his love. You will become that girl and either allow him to fulfill the pledge or be released from it. He may even ask you to perform the role of the cousin who dies in *A Dream of Red Mansions* or that of the lover of the scholar in the opera *White Snake*. A real weeper. This will require flowing robes for a costume, more white powder on the face for a ghostly effect. You should memorize scenes from the novel and master expressions of betrayal and forgiveness. It's harder than you think. You don't want to look murderous or like a fool. But if you master the look of tragedy, you can make a fortune. If you have truly lost someone, as I have, you will not need to pretend. You simply remember. Someday I will tell you all about him. I can't ever speak of him without having tears from my heart flood out from my eyes.

The most common request from suitors is the Illusion of the Noble Maiden. The man wants you to put on the same airs of a nobleman's daughter, whom he can woo into bawdy adventure, and without the meddling of a gabby mother-in-law. To achieve the Noble Maiden role, you wear clothes that are rich and dramatic, refined yet also a little daring. Perhaps the undergarments are skimpy and shocking red.

Some courtesans are asked to play what we call the Illusion of the Night Scholar. A little kohl to darken the eyebrows, the Ming hat of a philosopher, long robes. If he wants a warrior, the hair is oiled, parted on two sides, combed over the forehead, and knotted tightly at the back. Everyone says that it's become the fashion now, and all because of that courtesan who calls herself the Genuine Confucian Scholar. Ha! Such a clever slap in the face to real Confucians. When she sings at the storytelling halls, she damns those Confucian men who claim it's tradition to fuck their maids whenever they want. You know what happened to me, so I admire her for that. Although maybe she says this only to be shocking. What else can she do at

her age to call attention to herself? She must be at least thirty-five. I am not criticizing her antics. I admire her ingenuity. I say this even though she once stood up in her carriage and cursed me as I was going by in mine. She said I'd spread gossip about her. And I cursed her back, because the rumors were all true. Everyone knew she was cheating on two patrons at the same time. She jumped out of her carriage, and who knows what she would have done if two courtesans and their suitors had not held her back. She's vile-tempered, but that certainly has not hurt her success one bit. Maybe she caused a scene to get more attention in the press. Practically every day there are stories about her in the tabloids. Everyone says she's one of the genius courtesans, but it's ridiculous that she masks her age by dressing as a man. I don't need to do that. Without trying, at thirty-three, I still look younger than my years. My pudendum is still firm like a young girl's, not droopy at all despite years of experience. Several lovers have told me so.

Because of that old courtesan, the Night Scholar illusion has become quite popular these days, even in a few first-class houses. I don't know if the courtesans here do that. But it used to be done only in the second-class houses. That's what the old bustard allowed in the Hall of Tranquillity. The customer asked her for the Night Scholar, and she called the courtesan who was known for performing the role with some enthusiasm. A lot of that enthusiasm came from being older and having a last chance to make some good money. The customers piled on the gifts for a few days, and the gates to heaven opened. When I reached thirty, I became the Night Scholar most often requested, even though I look nothing like a man. There's no shame when you do it in your own boudoir. I didn't boast in the storytelling halls like desperate old you-know-who.

The old bustard also came up with another specialty to draw more business: Two Scholars. I played one of them,

and whoever was not so busy played the other. The customers did the usual wooing, but with two beauties. One of us would complain, "Hey, I do all the work. Why should she get the same amount?" Then the other of us made the same complaint. That's how we both cooperated to get more money. But we made it worth it to the man. He would enter the boudoir, quaking and close to bursting, when he saw two stern Confucian scholars. I held the ropes while the other wore a girdle with an ivory stem. I threw him silky undergarments to put on and called him a wife-whore. While he dressed, we sat at the tea table with legs crossed, smoking Western cigars. We commanded that he put on a headband, that he powder his face and rouge his lips. Oyo! What an ugly courtesan he made. Still, we flattered his prettiness, his youth, and called him "Little Pink Lotus." He had to call us "Lord Scholars," and I would bind him seated in the chair with his legs dangling over the arms, the usual position, nothing that special. He cried and begged, but alas, it was no use, and the other beauty crossed the threshold with the ivory stem. Where, you ask? How can you be so stupid? Where else would a stem go into a man? In his little pink lotus!

For the very generous ones, we let him rest a bit and then brought out another stem, and he now had to call us "Master Teachers." I would wear the ivory stem this time. For the extremely generous ones, there was a third stem, usually called "Uncle" or "Brother." That was the request. Family was always last, the most exciting.

Some men just liked a little variety. Others were homosexuals who pretended they were not, to hide their true nature from other businessmen. They didn't realize that some of those businessmen had the same secret. We were very discreet. We knew who fucked the pretty opera singers, because some of those singers were our lovers. The singers didn't enjoy it, but they did it for the money, that's all. Toward the end of my time at the Hall of

Tranquillity, I had one old man who liked to use the ivory stem both ways. That's the kind of customer a madam in a second-class house will take. I had to wear the Night Scholar clothes and apply Heavenly Showers ointment to get the man's ancient warrior to stand up. And because he quickly burst, he wanted to draw things out by using the stem on me. He gave me an extra gift, but I still didn't like it. Those fake stems never grow soft. It was too much work.

The only reason I am telling you this is so you will be prepared if a man asks for these things. If you know what they want, you won't be tempted by offers of extra money once they are inside your boudoir. I don't want you to play the role of a man. You are first-class. Your reputation is still that of a young beauty. Maybe the Genuine Confucian Scholar does that. Ha. She's probably crazy for it. But if a man hints that he wishes to wear your robes or he brings out an ivory stem on a girdle, you should go behind the screen and ring the chimes for me. Those customers know they are supposed to make those requests to the attendants ahead of time. I will politely tell him the Night Scholar is not available but that his teacher can take care of whatever lessons he needs. If he's urgent, he'll accept my offer. I won't mind doing this from time to time. A lot of the attendants who were once courtesans do the specialties no one else wants to do. I still have a girdle and different-size stems in my trunk. The bigger the tip, the bigger the stem—that's how it usually goes. Too bad I never had a big talent for playing the Scholar. I was not genuinely enthusiastic.

On occasion, we have clients who wish to receive instruction. Most are inexperienced. Formerly devout monks, young boys whose fathers are clients of ours, or customers who wish to learn the skills of an expert lover to woo another man's wife. If you come across these men, let me know. In fact, the initiation of young boys was a specialty of mine in my later years, and many of my former

suitors would ask for me especially when they brought their sons. I am always moved to tears when these same young boys come back as grown men and say to me, "Magic Gourd, because of you, my wife and concubines are content." Often they ask for a lesson, just for old times' sake. So you should let me take care of any client like this. They are not as choosy about how old the courtesan is. What matters to them is gaining knowledge that will last a lifetime.

Whatever any man requests, you should never degrade him for his desires, nor should you accept being degraded. If he's drunk and pisses on you, ring the chimes and I will come and remove him from your room. Don't accept extra money to let him do these things. You know what happens to a woman who lets herself be degraded? She winds up with a pimp and lies on the floor of a chophouse, where rickshaw pullers and laborers fuck her, one after another, a hundred a day. She never has a chance to close her legs or her mouth until she's pounded into raw meat and dies. I've always wondered why those women don't kill themselves. Maybe they think it's their fate and if they endure it they will have a better life in the next. I would rather kill myself and return as a fly.

* * *

Fashion

Don't let yourself become too thin. No man likes bony limbs poking them. And it's bad business if a suitor accidentally snaps a girl's ribs. Just before you came to the Hall of Tranquillity, that happened to one beauty. She screamed so loud that the madam, the attendant, and two menservants ran into the room, thinking the man was killing her. The

servants flung the naked man onto the streets. The old bustard learned he was an official who determined the fees for business licenses. This did not end favorably for anyone.

A fat courtesan holds no appeal, either. It limits what positions she can do without breaking the man's stem in two. Right now, you have a good shape. I think your breasts might grow to be a little larger than ideal. Large breasts were not attractive when I started my career, and those who had them would bind them up. But these days, younger men find large breasts lurid and exciting. It's the influence of pornographic Western postcards. I still think that large flopping breasts belong on a wet nurse. Don't do anything to grow them on purpose.

When it comes to clothes, everything about you should convey that you are a high-ranking courtesan. The best clothes should be worn in public—on carriage rides, in restaurants, at the theater. Your jacket will be so tight, everyone can see your shapeliness. The skirt will be well-fitted so that no imagination is needed to see the curves of your rump. There will be shocking Western details: buttons instead of clasps, frills and pleats. Or it could be men's trousers, or a Western skirt. This is where you must use your imagination. As you ride around in a carriage with your suitor, think of yourself as being on stage, like an actress. All eyes are on you. Your suitors and patrons are proud to show you off. It gives them face. They enjoy seeing envy in other men.

You'll have to share the carriage at times with another courtesan, and I'll do my best to avoid pairing you with a beauty who might draw more attention. You are not the loveliest of the flowers, not yet, and who knows if you ever will be. And with carriage rides, loveliness and fashionable clothes are what the public will see, rather than intimate skills of enchantment. So other means are needed to attract attention when you are in public.

I have several ideas we will use over the coming months. And we'll have to keep them a secret lest the other beauties steal them. First, I am having the tailor make a costume in the colors of the imperial family. We've used golden yellow in the past, but only with underwear, and for many men, this alone sent them into paroxysms of clouds and rain. Now that the emperor is gone, what laws forbid us from wearing any color, and anywhere that pleases us? Imagine what an imperial yellow jacket and kingfisher blue pantalets will do to a suitor and to every loyalist who sees you in public. We'll have costumes made in imperial violet, the exact shade. I am hoping we are the first to flaunt these colors. What a story that will make for the mosquito press: the courtesan Violet wearing violet clothes!

I've also been mulling over getting you a European hat. I saw one that was quite outlandish. It was the size of a seat cushion and had a fan of baby ostrich feathers on top, dyed violet. You'd be visible from blocks away, and with the color being the same as your name, you would be the talk of the tabloids every time you wore it. It's an expensive hat, so I may see if I can have it copied. Then again, if we wait, we run the risk that another courtesan will buy the hat and wear it first, and you can't be seen imitating another courtesan. That would be reported in the tabloids.

The clothes at dinner parties will depend on the host and the other courtesans there. As I said, you cannot outdazzle Vermillion. But for a party in your honor, you must wear your best evening costumes. The weave of the cloth has become the fashion. It is always a pattern that only the most skilled of craftsmen can make. We'll have to wait a bit before we can afford the one I have in mind. It looks like layers of petals. Clothes made out of fabrics like that will cost you a month's worth of earnings at least. Never eat anything at the party. A grease stain will ruin an outfit, and that would be a costly bit of greed. Some beauties have embroidered a flowery pattern to cover a stain, but

everyone knows why a branch of plum blossoms suddenly sprouts over the breasts.

In winter, the silk must be thick and as lustrous as a pearl. The collar looks best when lined with Russian shaved white fox or chinchilla. But rabbit will do the first year. In the summer, the top layer of silk weave will be delicate, tissue thin, and of a perfectly even weft, light but also crisp. You don't want to look wilted. Every detail must be perfect, from the clasp at the throat to the frills at the hem.

Women on the streets will envy and admire your clothes for their clever details. You'll enjoy seeing that. For many young girls, a glimpse of you will provide the greatest excitement of their lives. They'll be talking about you until they go to their graves. Rich young girls will take note as we pass by in carriages and run to the tailors we use and ask for a costume just like that worn by the famous courtesan Violet. It is annoying that rich girls imitate us, but it is also flattery. If many girls from rich families copy your fashions, this will raise your status. Men are not the only ones who make us popular. Look at those who are the Top Ten Beauties each year. Are they the most beautiful? No. They are the ones who understand human nature, that of men and women both. They know how to attract attention and envy and bend it to their advantage.

Don't be surprised if a few wives pay you handsomely to visit your boudoir—to see your wardrobe, your makeup, and even to learn the unusual positions their husbands enjoy. Show them. They think it is only about coupling, rather than prolonged courtship and the engorged pleasure of two lovers in conspiracy. They can no longer be courted. Their husbands make demands and they comply. So you need not worry that you are giving away your secrets and your patrons will become so satisfied with their wives that they never pay you a visit. But be sure you charge those wives a lot, at least five dollars.

Remember that envy is one of mankind's greatest flaws. It leads to recklessness by the one who envies and possessiveness by the one who has you by his side. You can use one suitor to increase the ardor of another. Beware not to do this between brothers or with friends who are like brothers, though. If they have a falling-out, people will say that you were so strong a plow cow you pulled two brothers apart.

After you've been to a few parties here and at other houses, you will understand more about envy among courtesans. You may have seen it at your mother's house. You will feel it bite you. Envy is a poisonous snake around your ankle. You may hate your competitor or your suitor. You may want to destroy her, him, and yourself. Take note of these feelings. Another courtesan may feel this way about you and will do everything to cause your downfall. But if you inspire envy from everyone, a strange thing happens. That envy eventually turns into respect, an acknowledgment of your superiority. Do not flaunt your victories, however. Your rivals may envy you one day and cheer your demise the next.

That reminds me: We must have a souvenir photograph made and decide on a nickname to set you apart from others.

If we don't choose one ourselves, people will give you one without asking. I already heard one of the other courtesans call you "the White Day Lily." A lot of virgins are called by that sweet name. But you don't want to be stuck with it forever or you'll be the butt of jokes—"No longer so white," that sort of thing. The nickname must be unique. I know of beauties who compared themselves to birds. "The Voice of a Sparrow." One girl chose that, even though she had a harsh voice. Besides, sparrows are so common and noisy with their chitter-chitter-chirp-chirp in the morning. Another girl I knew chose the description "As Classic As a Weeping Willow." I think she chose it because the painted

backdrop in the photo studio showed a willow and a lake. What's so special about that? "Weeping Willow"—someone who is wooden and weeps until her eyes are red and as big as eggs? These are not traits that men cherish. I'm thinking yours might be "A Waterfall Dream." It sounds good. A man can picture it: falling in love, swept away, torrential love. Something like that. We can come up with the exact meaning later when I decide who you really are.

You are young and inexperienced, Violet. No one will envy anything about you today. The beauties are much lovelier and trickier than you. So don't try to compete. Just observe. Few girls receive the kind of advice I am giving you. They learn it later, as I did, through agonizing mistakes. They thought beauty, poetry, and a sweet voice would last forever. They depended on it. They did not realize that what matters the most is a mix of strategy, cunning, honesty, patience, and readiness to grab every opportunity. Above all, a girl must always be willing to do what is necessary.

* * *

Accidents

Clothes are like a theater curtain. Some courtesans always keep the curtain closed until they open the curtains of the bed. They go by the old rules. No touching of hands. Everything very proper, as if they are a proper bride. How boring. The man may as well be with his wife. That kind of modesty may have been the custom twenty years ago, but these are modern times. If you provide a glimpse of the future, it won't cheapen you. You're still holding back. In fact, the more you let them peek, the more they will want what you are holding back. Just remember there is a

difference between giving a man a glimpse and letting him examine the goods in detail.

Some of the best glimpses occur during garden strolling accidents. These must seem perfectly innocent. It might go like this: You are wearing a tight jacket, and trousers whose seam fits into the crease of your pudendum. You walk by the rockeries and pond, engaged in lively conversation. Suddenly you cry out and pretend you have stepped on the sharp stone I secretly placed there earlier. Quickly sit on a garden stool and cross your legs so you can examine your imaginary wound. The pain has caused you to forget the lewdness of this position. When you catch the man staring at your pudendum, act embarrassed at first, then coy. He will play the role of the gallant gentleman who insists on examining the wound to ensure you are not crippled for life. This ploy was once successful only with girls whose bound feet were three-inch stubs. But nowadays, even the daughters of scholar families no longer have their feet bound. So there is no shame that your feet are unbound. Of course, some men will be disappointed, especially the older ones. If you notice ahead of time that the man is aroused by tiny "golden lilies," it's best not to bother with the injured-foot ploy.

Another trick is to ask your suitor to pluck a flower for your hair. Turn away from him as you attempt to slip it along the side, by your ear. Then let it fall. In your hurry to retrieve the flower, you bend over, and the jacket that had barely covered your hips now lifts like fog from the moon. Be sure he has a view of your rump for at least three seconds. When you stand and see his face, cover your mouth with the flower and laugh. Give the sly happy look of mutual conspiracy. When he is standing beside you, push your finger into the center of the flower and note for him the darker, more flushed color, the deeper fragrance. He will nearly be insane at this point, unless the flower that fell has lost its petals and is a weedy little thing.

There are some simple garden positions you can use. Stand next to a tree, and as you admire its age and strength, straddle it ever so slightly. Columns are also good for this purpose.

After your defloration, I will lend you some of my special skirts. Here is one in your color, a rich imperial violet. The whiteness of the skin is best against a darker-colored skirt. The middle panel conceals a split, like the part between two curtains. You can close the split with frog clasps. Or you can unfasten them to show the knees, or the thighs, or the pudendum. This skirt is only for very special suitors or patrons who enjoy showing you off in public. Never cheapen yourself by revealing what is beneath the skirt if your suitor requests a look. Everything with this skirt must be an accident you control. The more generous the suitor, the more accidents you should have. You might catch your skirt on the arm of a horseshoe chair. The flap opens, the whiteness of your skin flashes, and with your coy look of surprise you've given your patron two seconds of titillation. A variation is to loosely sew the clasps on so that they easily rip away.

You can have accidents of the skirt at the theater. Patrons are especially fond of this if you are seated in a curtained box. Once he discovers the opening, you can allow him to stroke you throughout the performance, but only if he's given you a gift that night. Mounting and descending the carriage are also good opportunities for suitors who need only a nudge to become a patron. Blustery days are also advantageous. Let your fingers help the gusts raise your skirt. If the man is already your patron, you can allow him other privileges. When you are at a banquet in your honor, let his hand under the table slip between your legs to explore the forbidden in front of his guests. Converse brightly but hesitate every so often, and provide the half-lidded look you learned for your songs. The others will know exactly what is happening. Nothing is openly said,

but all will know. Always maintain the appearance of propriety. In this way, you can enhance the agony of desire in your patron and in his envious guests. I guarantee the party will end earlier than usual.

* * *

Preparing the Boudoir

I have furnished your room with every comfort to set the stage for lovemaking. You saw that I already had your bed placed closer to the middle of the room so I could move the screen that hides the toilet and bathing tub. It was so cramped and uncomfortable before. And how can you feel clean if the bathing tub resembles an old threshing box? The chamber pot was so low that old men on rusted legs had a hard time seating themselves and standing back up. I don't know why I did not think of that when this was my boudoir. Now your suitor and you can refresh yourselves in more spacious surroundings. The new chamber pot is set under a carved seat with armrests. And the pot is porcelain, a nice oxblood red, easy to clean. I've ordered a new bathing tub, one of the Western ones, copper, with lions' feet. Very fashionable. It has already arrived, but I cannot have it put in your room until next week. Vermillion saw the same one, and she must be the first to have it. There will be a Western coatrack for your dressing robes, a tufted bench, and a table with ointments, perfumes, and snuff bottles containing invigorating powder. To call the servants to tidy up, you simply strike the four bars of the new chimes I bought. It is the same instrument used on the finest railways to announce that dinner will be served.

I have thought of even more decorations and luxuries. They are all the things I should have thought to use with

my own suitors. I decorated my room one way and then never changed it. As I grew older, my room appeared increasingly old-fashioned. I recognize that now. The furniture is still high-quality, though, and I'm sure I can sell it for a good price. But to buy the new furniture we need, we will require money gifts. So you see how important it is that you do well at the parties right from the start. We cannot borrow money endlessly from the madam, or we'll be slaves to her the rest of our lives. At the very least I will reupholster the chairs and sofa, and I am having new curtains made for the bed. Silk batiste in golden emperor yellow with blue embroidered characters that mean longevity. I bought yellow and blue ribbons and dozens of little bells. They'll be tied on the corners and above and will sound merrily with the slightest jiggle of your hips, letting the man know he's headed toward heavenly ecstasy. It's a clever touch, my own idea. I might even take a customer every now and then just so I can hear the sound of those bells.

* * *

Preparing the Pudendum

Tomorrow, Vermillion's maid will come with her threads and remove all the hair from your pudendum, armpits, and upper lip. A virgin must be pure white. And right now you are as hairy as a man. Curly hair on the pudendum is unattractive, like seaweed, not at all silky. We'll simply have to call in Vermillion's maid once a week to keep your little mound a white tigress. Don't be tempted by ointments and poultices recommended by other courtesans as having the power to remove hair forever. Those have been known to shrivel up a woman's pudendum so that it looks like an old

woman's crack. One so-called remedy ate away the girl's skin and it was the color of raw meat after that. The courtesans who recommend them may swear they were not aware it would cause this damage, but everyone knows it was done as revenge. So if anyone comes to you with potions of any kind—to remove hair, to increase your desire or that of your suitor—come to me immediately and tell me what she said and show me what she gave you. I'll threaten to pour it on her until she admits it was an evil ruse.

For the next year, you will learn a dozen positions each month. Never do just one position. They must be used in combinations that surprise him, one rotation after another. You should provide the unexpected even on the night of your defloration. Innocence and bafflement quickly become tiresome. You cannot be lazy and helpless, expecting that your first lover will serve you, unless it is clear that this is what he desires. When a man buys your defloration, he wants your innocence, some hesitation, and cries of pain as proof that he is the first. At the same time, he does not want the awkwardness of a girl's inexperience and screaming all night long. What man wants to pry apart a girl's crossed arms and legs every few minutes without gaining headway? Men are romantic. What they hold as the ideal is not what comes naturally to women. Over the next year, we will go through lovemaking possibilities that will convince your first suitor you are worth the price. There's a famous joke told in brothels: Two men ask a man who has just deflowered a virgin, "How was the battle opening the pavilion gate? Was it as intoxicating as ten cups of wine?" The other man answers, "I got through the gate easily enough, but inside there was only half a cup." Half a cup. That's what some men say when they have paid dearly for disappointment.

I know you are not ignorant of what a man looks like in a fully florid state. When I worked at Hidden Jade Path, I used to see you peeking through my lattice window. You

were like a little moth, and I couldn't yell at you without spoiling the man's arousal. I'm sure your snoopiness continued over the years, and now you yourself will practice what used to interest you so much. I have hired a young man from the opera troupe. He's a talented actor and capable of doing whatever I tell him, all the positions, the dramas and illusions—all without piercing your bud. And there's no chance he will try. He is a homosexual and finds no pleasure in a woman's body, only in the actor's art. You will call the actor by the names that fit the lesson: Lord Yang, the Hermit, the Sage, the Marquis, and others I conjure up. He will call you Miss Delight, Madame Li, Widow Li, Lady Li, Fairy Maiden, Slave Girl, and such.

Don't worry: You will both be clothed in loose pajamas, although at times I will have him wear only bandages to cover his stem and pouches, and he'll wear the girdle and fake stem so that you can pay attention to where things fit. He won't touch you, of course, only aim in the right direction. He won't be aroused by the sight of you, so I'll ask him to caress himself so you can also see the changes in his coloring, his breathing, his pupils, and the tension and relaxation of his limbs. The bandages will be wrapped tight so there is no danger anything will pop out.

To begin, you will learn the Four Basics: embracing, opening, piercing, and rolling. They may seem obvious, but there is an art to each of these, a rhythm and a gracefulness. The same skills of patience and gracefulness apply to all of the positions. We will practice the art of all your movements—how quickly to move your limbs, when to arch your back. Every courtesan has a hundred methods at her disposal. Upwards, backwards, seated, standing, feet pressed on his stomach, legs in the air, the Bucking Horse, the Swaying Bamboo Shoots, Tigress Meets the Dragon, Oysters in the Turtle Shell—all the ways that five thousand years of lovemaking, excitement, and boredom have

devised. Learning takes a lifetime. To enhance your reputation, we'll invent a few ourselves.

The actor will give you lessons on convincing expressions so that you can display the Nine Urges—moaning, groaning, pleading, and so forth, but not all of them on the first night. But by the second night, you will need to show up to the eighth to prove he has awakened the maiden in the grotto. The actor will also mimic for you the Two Responses of the male: groaning with desire and then grunting with satisfaction. Gratitude should be the third, and a nice gift the fourth.

I'm going to make finger-shaped sacks—some thin, some thicker—with uncooked rice inside. He can use them to show you how to pleasure men who have difficulties getting their stem to stand up. Sometimes it falls asleep. To give him confidence, you must always refer to his stem as the Warrior or the Dragon Head. Men are very easily pleased by these words. You might be with a man who seems quite virile at the party but is ashamed later that his warrior was more of a foot soldier. For both these cases, the actor will show you how to use rings and clips, so you can see how the rice bulges upward and makes the stem straight and thick. Many customers have also favored our gold and kingfisher blue ribbons. They become quite commanding when they wear the emperor's colors. Of course, now that the emperor has abdicated, the ribbons may not have the same effect. I will also place in your room lust-arousing potions. Use only those, never any given to you by another courtesan. Those could be anything from vinegar to chili oil. Happiness in the Pavilion is a good brand, and it won't set the stem on fire and send your suitor leaping about in agony. It has happened with other brands. Men may think the more potions they drink, the larger they will become. That will only make them vomit or will loosen their bowels all night long. So pay attention to the amount.

Each night, I want you to lie in your bed and try to arouse yourself. I will give you a pearl polisher and a lotion called Gates Wide Open. When you can't stop yourself, you'll know what I'm talking about. If these things do not bring you to the heights, I will ask the actor to help you practice the expressions you should make. He's very professional. When a man sees a woman with urgency in her face, that's like love to them. You might as well get used to the pearl polisher. Many suitors will bring their own bag of toys, and pearl polishers are a favorite among those who like seeing a beauty writhe and gasp like a fish out of water. You will know later what I am talking about. I have received quite a few of these pearl polishers as gifts over the years. Frankly, I would have preferred a bolt of silk.

You may discover you feel little in the way of pleasure at the beginning. Many new beauties dislike sex. It may be that the first suitor is rough or the patron is old or has no lovemaking skills. Or he may be spoiled and have many ridiculous requirements, and you feel more like a nursemaid to a demanding child. Be patient. Not all of them are terrible. I am telling you about the bad ones so that if these situations happen, you will not be surprised. If you don't have romantic ideas in your head about this work, you won't be crushed.

Who knows—after your first patron, you might be surprised that your second treats you with such tenderness you will think this career is not work but play. That is seldom true with the first, however. They have purchased your defloration, and tenderness won't be what gets them through the gates. If you cry, they won't stop and soothe you. They won't apologize.

But later there will be suitors who act like true lovers, and perhaps they will genuinely want to give you pleasure. A man like this loves to watch a woman reach the immortal heights. It gives him power when he has seduced a courtesan using the same ruses she used with him. You'll

be tempted to believe you are no longer a courtesan with this man. You will give yourself freely, without expectation of money, and you will believe with all your heart that this happiness will last forever. The scent of this man will cause you to abandon everything I have taught you. This will happen to you many times with many men.

And I will be there to restore your common sense.

About the Author



Amy Tan is the author of the bestselling novels *The Joy Luck Club*, *The Kitchen God's Wife*, *The Hundred Secret Senses*, *The Bonesetter's Daughter*, and *Saving Fish from Drowning* as well as *The Opposite of Fate*, a memoir. She has also written two children's books, *The Moon Lady* and *Sagwa, The Chinese Siamese Cat*. Her work has been adapted for film, television, theater, and opera, and she serves as lead rhythm dominatrix, backup singer, and second tambourine with the literary garage band, the Rock Bottom Remainers, whose members include Stephen King, Dave Barry, and Scott Turow. The band's performances have raised over a million dollars for literacy programs. She is at work on a new novel, *The Valley of Amazement*, to be published by Ecco in the fall of 2012.

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