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INVISIBLE TRADE

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“*Invisible Trade* is a ground-breaking book on Singapore’s sex industry.” *Agence France-Presse*

“The focus on sex-for-hire in Singapore has been further sharpened by a new book *Invisible Trade* on a thriving world of high-class prostitution in Singapore.” *Reuters*

“This book hit number one on bestseller lists in Singapore.” *Publishers Weekly*

“Kudos to ... Gerrie Lim for this under-the-covers exposé of high-class sex acts for sale ...without any sensationalizing of his ravishable subjects.” *I-S Magazine* (Singapore)

“Frank, fascinating, weird and unputdownable!” *Harper's Bazaar Singapore*

“[Gerrie Lim's] appearances in the conservative city-state have been packed with fans who have made *Invisible Trade* a hit across Asia ... The book has also found an audience among those who are simply curious about life behind closed doors in straitlaced Singapore.” *South China Morning Post*

Gerrie Lim

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Idol to Icon:
The Creation of Celebrity Brands

* In Lust We Trust:
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* (published by Monsoon Books)

INVISIBLE TRADE

High-class sex for sale in Singapore



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For P.H.
“my two-dollar bill”

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Preface

This book was initially inspired by *Speed Tribes: Days and Nights With Japan's Next Generation* by Karl Taro Greenfeld, in particular a chapter called “Jackie: The Hostess,” about the lives of American girls who work as bar hostesses in Tokyo. I would like to thank Karl for his informal complicity and sagely advice.

Like *Speed Tribes*, this is not a work of fiction but most of the names have been changed. I am immensely grateful to all the interviewees for allowing me access to their secret world. A number of escorts and other sex workers were composited into the “characters” found in the chapters. I am also grateful beyond measure to the escort agency owners who willingly granted me interviews and allowed me to interview their girls. Their names have also been changed, upon their request.

Also, for obvious reasons, none of the names of the major hotels have been divulged, nor the names of clients. Should anyone reading this book come to recognize themselves in a particular anecdote or episode, I can only offer my apologies for any embarrassment caused. This book is not meant at all to dissuade you from your lifestyle.

PART ONE



Courtesan Confidential

The Mongolian Strangler

Politics hadn't stopped prostitution;
it had complicated it, taken the fun out of it
and made it assume disguises.

—Paul Theroux, *Saint Jack*

It's nine o'clock in Singapore, a typical balmy night in the tropics. Humidity hangs heavily in the air as Jasmine hails a taxi into town. It's time to go to work.

She's going to strangle a man again.

Philip's already waiting when she reaches the hotel on Orchard Road. He's just flown in from his office in Tokyo. He called the escort agency from his cellphone while waiting for his bags at Changi Airport, requesting for Jasmine once more. Where some might view this as impatience, Philip prefers to think of it as anticipation. He knows what he wants,

so why delay the gratification? Book the girl as soon as you get in. Lock and load. Crosshairs on the target.

Philip likes this tall, lithe girl from Mongolia, with her jet-black hair and long, strong legs. And strong legs are essential for what he has in mind. Philip thinks she's easily impressed, especially with his suave looks, designer labels, and taste for fine wines. Tonight, he's already made a start on a 2000 Joseph Phelps Insignia Napa Valley, S\$250 a bottle, a score of ninety-two from *Wine Spectator*. But Californian Cabernet isn't what Jasmine really comes here for, and she's not that easily impressed. After all, at S\$600 an hour, she's worth a few bottles of those, though she feeds a distinctly different appetite.

No fancy dinner, no small talk. Jasmine reclines on the carpet fully clothed as Philip undresses himself. Totally naked now, he rests his neck on her thighs and signals for her to begin. Ten minutes later he reaches climax and they're done.

Auto-asphyxiation normally requires a man to loop a noose around his neck with a rope or a belt. The choking sensation produces a terrific rush when he masturbates to climax. But Philip isn't going the way of Michael Hutchence of INXS, who did just that and was found dead in a

Sydney hotel room. That's why he needs Jasmine, who chokes him—with her thighs.

If by chance he's quaffed too much wine, he'll slap her leg gently. This is their signal, meaning she's supposed to stop.

"He likes me to strangle him so he can reach a really intense orgasm, and he always comes," explains Jasmine. "When I'm doing it, I'm usually dressed and he's the one who's naked. I wear jeans. I can't wear any kinds of pants that can be slippery. They have to have a grip."

Jasmine, now twenty-eight, first came to Singapore eight years ago when a friend enrolled her in a computer programming class. She learned the basics in Singapore before completing her computer science studies in Melbourne, Australia, funded in part by her escorting tips. Until she met her current agency boss in Singapore six years ago, Jasmine had never worked in any area of the sex industry.

"In the beginning, every job was difficult for me," she recalls. "I wouldn't say I'm very experienced even now, but I know what I'm doing. Once I made the decision to do this, it took about six months for me to get used to it and a year to get to the point where I could feel confident in my abilities. In my opinion, that's slow compared to some other girls. In the early days I wouldn't even know which hotel to

go to and when I got there, I'd get lost. I got lost at the first big hotel I had to go to. I didn't know which of the three wings the room was in! I went back to the agency crying. They sent another girl. I lost that client."

People outside the sex industry suspect there's sex involved in escorting, but they don't know how much. The average booking lasts for three hours but this is for escorting only: dinner, dancing, karaoke, or maybe even a shopping trip. Sex usually takes place afterwards, if requested by the client, and is always negotiated separately after the initial booking time has elapsed. The carnal congress can last as long as the client's money allows. "It depends," Jasmine reveals. "It can last from thirty minutes to an hour. Usually, they like to finish pretty quickly but I can get them going again after that. That's how I get repeat customers—I'd say 40 percent of mine are repeats. But I had one guy who took a very long time, almost one hour, to get fully aroused. When it comes to sex, I usually don't mind if the guy is good and can really last a long time, because I can last a long time myself. But it's hard if it takes a long time for him to even get erect. I had to do a lot of touching and a lot of encouraging."

Such techniques require learning, outside the classroom. "Sometimes I watch porno movies," Jasmine giggles. "You

can get them even in Mongolia, believe it or not, especially in the capital, Ulan Bator, where I grew up." Actually, pornographic material is also available in Singapore, even though it's officially banned; everything is for sale if you know where to look. Lucky for Jasmine, since she intends to remain in Singapore rather than return to Mongolia. "If you're shopping in Ulan Bator, you have to choose between ethnic art, ethnic dresses, cashmere sweaters, and chess sets. And if you want to mail a letter, you have to personally go to the post office; mailboxes on the streets don't exist." Not the sort of place where a girl gets paid to strangle a guy for his sheer sexual pleasure then—particularly with her thighs.

"I have also done strangling with my arms but I don't think I'm strong enough for that," Jasmine concedes. "I have had guys ask me to try to use my arms. Some girls prefer to do that, but not me. I'm more comfortable doing it with my legs. When I'm done, I don't even have to clean him up. He just goes off to the toilet himself and I'm done."

The S\$600 Jasmine earns from Philip is not bad at all for ten minutes' work. Agency rules are such that Philip has to pay the entire hourly rate, even if it took a mere ten minutes. Strangulation is S\$600 an hour, and anything kinkier, like whipping or spanking, starts at S\$700 to S\$1,000 an hour.

As Jasmine leaves the room with S\$600 in cash, she gets a peck on the cheek from Philip. She ambles down the corridor and into the elevator as Philip returns to his Joseph Phelps.

Jasmine's had sex in three rooms of this hotel in the past year. Only one strangulation, but there have been a few more in other hotels, other rooms. The money sure is good, assuming you don't kill anyone.

When an ambitious, adventurous gent named Sir Thomas Stamford Raffles "discovered" this tiny Southeast Asian island in 1819, claiming it for the British Crown, he envisioned it as a geographical gateway between East and West. The years since have seen it flourish commercially, though some would shake their heads in disbelief if they knew what else went on behind closed doors.

Some aspects of the sex trade are well known, with much made of it by the foreign news media—approximately 190 foreign correspondents from eighty-five news agencies are based in Singapore and thirty-two foreign publications are printed here. But much of what goes on is not reported in the local or foreign press and its existence would no doubt come as a surprise to many Singapore residents as well as foreigners.

Singapore has enjoyed nearly forty years of prosperity

following independence in 1965, first from the British Empire and then from the Malaysian Federation. But as many cultural observers have noticed, rapid modernization has come at a heavy price: the quashing of political dissent by a single-party government and the censorship of mass media. Italian travel writer Tiziano Terzani wrote of Singapore in *A Fortune-Teller Told Me: Earthbound Travels in the Far East*, that "behind all its alluring and welcoming shopping malls, shopping arcades and shopping centers, it remains a police state, a society shot through with a subtle fear."

Interestingly, Singapore's tourism industry, a critical element given the country's lack of natural resources, spawned a quick-turnover visitor market together with some of the best five-star hotels in the world. The Ritz-Carlton Millenia Singapore houses art by Frank Stella and David Hockney, its 608 rooms good enough for the likes of entertainers Mariah Carey and Alanis Morissette. Or the more famous Raffles Hotel, which hosted luminaries Elizabeth Taylor, Michael Jackson, and John Lennon, now refurbished with an exclusive shopping arcade attached.

Escorts like Jasmine only work five-star hotel rooms. Their affluent clientele are disposable men with disposable income, answering the higher callings of their libido.

And why not? Should anyone be surprised? The sexually voracious male is hardly a stranger to these parts. The late Helmut Newton, the celebrated erotic photographer from Berlin, devotes quite a lot of space to Singapore in his recently published autobiography (called *Autobiography*), in which he recalls his strange tenure here from 1938 to 1940, while fleeing Nazi Germany en route to Australia. Newton name-checked notorious pimping spots in Singapore like the old Change Alley (incorrectly calling it “Chaney Alley”). Paul Theroux, of course, wrote the most famous book about prostitution in Singapore, his 1973 novel *Saint Jack*, in which he describes how girls are brought in, “docked at Pasir Panjang behind a palm grove,” rather than at the more heavily policed piers of Collyer Quay and Jardine Steps. The protagonist, an American refugee named Jack Flowers, flees a probable drug bust in Boston only to end up pimping in Singapore for fourteen years. His shenanigans include running the Paradise Gardens “hotel” for visiting U.S. military personnel—a revolving-door deployment of redneck yahoos and sad sacks, fatally assigned to the Vietnam conflagration but fatefully, pleurably, grappling with girls named Florence, Soo-hin, and Annapurna, and etching forever into the annals of famous literary place-names some of the local

streets like Adam Road and Jalan Kembang Mati.

Flowers naturally exalts his vocation, describing it as “perfect candour, private discovery, the enactment of the white bachelor’s fantasy, the next best thing to marrying a sweet obedient Chinese girl. I could provide, without danger, the ultimate souvenir: the experience, in the flesh, of fantasy.”

Thirty years later, prostitution remains legal in Singapore, but only because it is regulated. In the East Coast enclave of Geylang, legal brothels exist but the girls must ply their trade only in the designated houses, never out on the streets. They carry yellow-colored identification cards, marking them as legal sex workers.

Yet a whole other subculture is thriving, with no need for government intervention and yellow cards. It thrives on discretion and secrecy. The girls answer advertisements in the papers calling for “confidential hostesses”; the word “escort” is not permitted in newspaper advertising, though it is in the Singapore *Yellow Pages* phone book. At last count, there were twenty-two pages of escort agencies, some of which pay S\$40,000 to S\$60,000 per advertisement. Most of the girls are extremely well turned-out. Hair and make-up just right, backless halter dresses and skirts just above

the knee. Swarovski pendants, Louis Vuitton handbags and definitely no gimcrack jewelry. Many of them are well-read (Xaviera Hollander's *The Happy Hooker* is mandatory, Louise Brown's more academic *Sex Slaves* is passed around) and some are even students, pursuing degrees in business administration and computer programming.

And, because they're not mere sex-doll bimbos, they command atypical prices. Yellow-card girls will service a guy for only S\$50. One escort received a S\$500 tip for simply accompanying a gentleman to breakfast at 7.30 a.m. No sex was involved. He merely wanted the company of a pretty girl as he babbled on about mutual funds. This particular escort was perfect because she was pursuing a Master's degree in Finance and wanted someday to be a financial controller.

As Terence, the owner of an escort agency in Singapore, succinctly puts it, the idea is to simply "facilitate companionship"; the client pays a booking fee to secure a girl, and "what happens after dinner is between him and the girl, I don't need to know." The client, of course, pays extra hourly rates to "extend the booking." Elsewhere, karaoke hostesses and massage parlors provide sexual services behind closed doors. Things can get interesting in the private rooms of karaoke bars, to the tune of S\$300 for a bottle of

Chivas Regal, S\$300 for sex. Or S\$100 for a blow job, if that's all you can afford. A karaoke bar hostess will sit on your lap, pull her top down and let you play with her. She'll nonchalantly lean over to get a cigarette, allowing you to slip your hand inside her G-string. At some of these places, the evening's drink tab can hit S\$2,000 for just two guys, up to S\$8,000 if you've brought a small entourage. And that's not including tips for the girls.

There are, Terence says, too many girls from mainland China now, "spoiling the market" because they're avaricious—rude and crude, grasping and greedy. Not the kind of image that the upscale escort agencies want to project. None of the high-end agencies will ever employ these girls, who end up at the flashy karaoke bars or in the rinky-dinky massage parlors, which are also drolly called "health centers."

And then, there's the newest phenomenon, the Natashas and Zitas, the Russian and Eastern European girls who work out of three-star hotels with their private pimps. In these times, through the unraveling economic tailspin, more girls have started coming in from Uzbekistan, usually via neighboring Malaysia.

Svetlana comes to Singapore and instantly becomes

Sandy, because she has sandy-blond hair. She's drop-dead gorgeous and could be mistaken for a fashion model. Some of these girls actually are, moonlighting as escorts for a few weeks before hurtling across the Causeway, to get their passports stamped with "social visit passes." They always tell you they're here for "tourism." They're walking down Orchard Road, Scotts Road, past Takashimaya and into the triangle demarcated by Hotel Grand Central, Cuppage Plaza, and Orchard Plaza, where the karaoke bars are doing their usual roaring business.

But these girls aren't going to pour drinks or light cigarettes or offer hot towels to drunken Japanese executives. They're traipsing into hotel rooms and private condos with all the swank and swagger of the newly enfranchised. Some of them are merely in long-term rebellion against their straight-laced, middle-class backgrounds, while others, like Sandy, do it because they really need the money, and then find themselves stuck. The money is too good, too easily gained, and in no time the shopping, gambling, or drug bills mount up. Working girls keep on working, to finance an opulent lifestyle.

So spins the wheel of fate, surely as money makes the world go round. But only the most sexually repressed per-

son would hate them for being so beautiful and so bold. Especially in this newly globalized world, where geopolitical borders cannot hamper their invisible trade.

Ask Sandy. She'll tell you that at the end of the day, she'll do what needs to be done because she needs the money. Hers is a quiet desperation born of pain, an unyielding pathos her rich clients don't need to understand. Her high heels and sexy clothes are for a costume party of the mind; part fun, part illusion.

"You would know, if you have ever been to Tashkent," she says. "I don't want to be poor anymore."