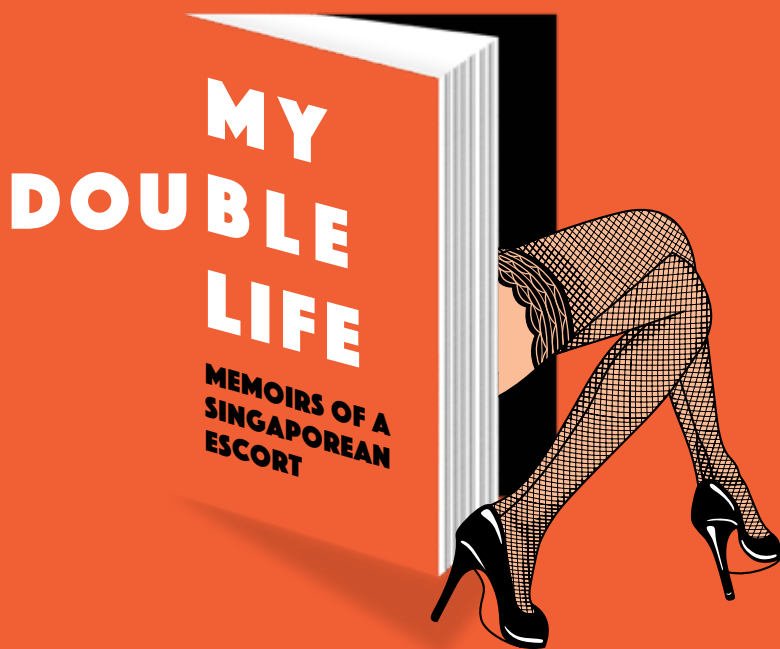


"INCREDIBLY STIMULATING."

—Paul Theroux, author of *Saint Jack*

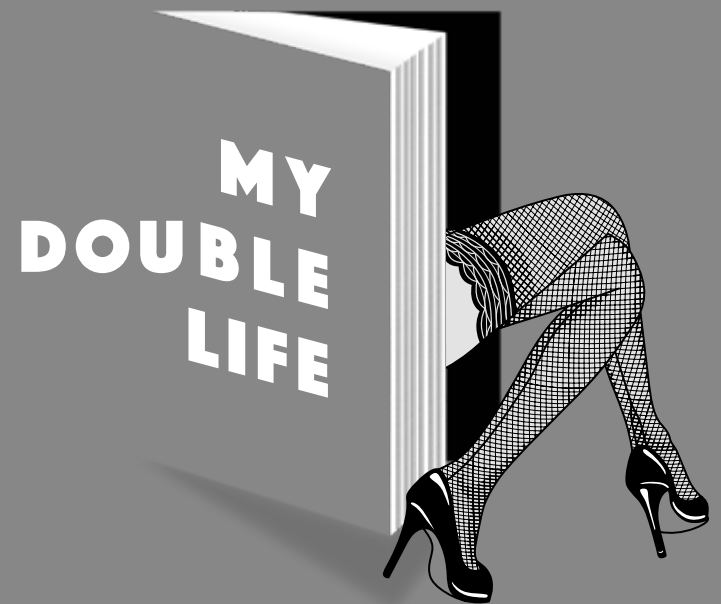
SCARLET HARLOT



ASHLEY CHAN
WITH GERRIE LIM

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EPIGRAM
SINGAPORE • LONDON

*To all the women who have loved and nurtured me
despite the sacrifices of sex work;
I won't name names but you know who you are*

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Cover design by Jael Ng

Published in Singapore by Epigram Books

www.epigram.sg

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**National Library Board,
Singapore Cataloguing-in-Publication Data**

Name(s): Chan, Ashley. | Lim, Gerrie, author.
Title: Scarlet harlot : my double life / Ashley Chan with Gerrie Lim.
Description: Singapore : Epigram Books, [2020] | Includes index.
Identifier: OCN 1193185446 | ISBN 978-981-49-0130-7 (paperback) |
978-981-49-0131-4 (ebook)
Subject(s): Prostitutes—Singapore—Biography. | College students—
LCSH: Singapore—Biography. | Escort services—Singapore.
Classification: DDC 306.742095957—dc23

First edition, November 2020.

“That was the first time I noticed that the men who embrace me, every single one of them, end up with an expression of emptiness when they are done, as if they have lost something. Maybe that is why I am always in search of a new man.

Maybe that is why I am now a prostitute.”

Natsuo Kirino, *Grotesque*

“We are what we pretend to be, so we must be careful about what we pretend to be.”

Kurt Vonnegut, *Mother Night*

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Author's Note

This memoir started as a series of blog posts, running from January 2017 to April 2018. The blog was called *Scarlet Harlot*—because Scarlet was the original pseudonym that Ashley used, and Harlot was a rhyming-couplet thing that I thought of. We agreed that it sounded good and, for those who see it as sexist, we honestly beg to disagree.

The blog ran on the website of *Adult Industry Press* and there were eight posts, whose monthly publication was interrupted when Ashley left the industry for nine months (for reasons that will be explained in these pages). By October 2017, I decided there was a book to be written, with more details about the serious issues in her life, though it

didn't happen without some difficulty (particularly during the Covid-19 pandemic, when the edits came back from my editor and my rewriting started).

The original idea of co-writing an escort's memoir actually began in 2012, when an American publicist asked me about writing a book with her client Gillian Sloan, then working at the Love Ranch, a brothel in Nevada. (The book, which we called *Courtesan Confidential*, was never published because Gillian decided to leave the industry.) Prior to that, I had co-written *Absolute Mayhem* with Australian porn star Monica Mayhem, published in 2010.

With *Scarlet Harlot*, some names of people and places have been changed to protect the privacy of those involved. Any wayward comparison to anyone's real-life shenanigans is seriously and sincerely unintentional.

Gerrie Lim

CHAPTER 1

The First Thing I Wanted

“EVERYTHING IS A TRADE-OFF AND A COMPROMISE.”



The first thing I wanted to be was an actress. It’s rather ironic because I’m actually named after a well-known actress, according to my mother—my real name, that is. (Ashley Chan is my pseudonym, of course.) These days, you could say I *am* acting. I’m what would be called, in the old manner of speaking, a courtesan.

In our modern times, the term is “call girl” or “harlot”, though personally I prefer “escort”. In Mandarin, I’m an expert at “mai yin”. It’s a deceptively simple proposition: people pay me to “act out” their sexual fantasies and since most of them are complete strangers, the variations are aplenty.

I do confess, I pretty much do them all—within reason.

I'm fine with my job, though admittedly it isn't an easy thing to say. Some people cringe at the thought of having sex for money—for all sorts of reasons, as you can imagine—but there are trade-offs. One of the main attractions is that my work has taken me to some wild places. I have my “fly me to you” clients, who want me to meet them in London, Tokyo, Hong Kong or Taiwan. I also have terrible clients, like an Indonesian Chinese businessman whose money I mostly returned when he threatened to report me to the police. I could not stand his bullshit and left the hotel room early.

I'm twenty-four years old, a five-foot-three (160cm) Chinese Singaporean, and I measure 32B-24-35. (The real-life actress I'm named after is 35-22-35.) I've been described as good-looking in a slim and slightly curvaceous way, and I dress to fit the occasion, depending on whom I'm meeting: definitely sensual if the work calls for it and much more casual when I'm at university.

And yes, I'm at university. This is my final year there, and my fourth year as an escort.

Consequently, I lead a double life—with all the trappings (and traps, to be sure) of someone who has to hide a secret to live a real life, one that leads to the proverbial yellow brick road and true “happiness” (whatever that is). Along the way, I've hit a few roadblocks, two of which were pivotal: I left the escort industry in my third year but went back to it, and in my fourth year, I nearly killed myself.

Both have left me somewhat ill at ease with the future. (You'll read about it later.) It's a relatively new feeling, and to be honest it makes me feel like I should leave the industry despite the many good things that have happened.

Bad things do happen if you stay in the game too long. Of course, if I do leave, I'll probably hold onto a few of my favourite clients—just to remind me of the nice parts of the job. I like to kiss, for instance. One girl in Australia charged an extra fifty dollars for kissing; that's crazy. Here in Asia, we kiss them for free, because we *want* to! (And I do like some of the

men I've kissed.) I think that's the rule, in general, for Chinese escorts. It's about the girlfriend experience, so we don't charge or it becomes transactional. Men don't appreciate that. They want to feel like they're your boyfriend; they want you to see them as "people", not just "clients". Or rather, they just want to pay you and forget about it—or forget they ever paid you!

One thing I can remember growing up is the motto from my secondary school: "With Constancy and Purpose". Those words, when I think about it, have defined my life. Even if you don't know where you're going, you at least have an objective in mind, and that's something I believe in: you should at least mark where you want to go, so you have some purpose.

So to call a spade a spade, I'm proud to call myself a fledgling whore. Speaking frankly, as an escort, I've sucked and fucked my way since November 2015—orally, vaginally and anally. The second position is the most popular, but it's my least favourite.

I like that I have preferences, you know.

So how on earth did I get into this? Or, to put it bluntly, did I not at some point in my career think that what I do is wrong?

Well, the answer is yes. But I only thought this in the beginning. Lately, I've come to realise and fully understand that everything is a trade-off and a compromise. It took a while for that concept to sink in, and it was no easy task.

What I mean is, you can't be scared and do sex work. You can't keep thinking that taking off your clothes and acting sensual is morally wrong because then you *can't* do sex work and you *will* go crazy.

I have in my career seen many girls who have gone crazy—girls who think it's a playground for the rich and try to hook a man for his money, girls who fall in love but have to deal with a vengeful wife who finds out. In other words, these are girls who don't fully understand what they're working for or what their purpose is as a sex worker.

I've fully internalised it, so I don't feel the guilt and shame. This has made my clients trust me—they

confide in me and know that I won't use their secrets against them. They are also certain I won't do foolish things, like go crazy and stab them one day, or go to their house and expose their secret lives.

It also means, however, something else—that I can be pretty distant. Sometimes I can be emotionally close but, in other areas, I am emotionally closed *off*. I will go for the money when the time is right—I've been pretty mercenary since I was young anyway—and then back off when a client is “spoken for” and I don't need to “bother” him anymore.

Some of my favourite clients understand this and are equally reciprocal. They don't need me to text them repeatedly to remind them of appointments, and for some of my regulars, they know when to meet each week. They know I need time to recharge, and at my own pace. We'll talk when we meet, and not a moment sooner. They understand that for me, it's tiring to answer emails from different aspects of my life. I'm always on the phone because of my many emails and I have to tell people I'm a hard person to get a reply from.

Paying for sex falls into this grey area, where people who need their sexual needs met are willing to go about it in a transactional manner, rather than, say, find mistresses and then inadvertently destroy their lives. Sure, it's not exactly the most ethical thing to do and not what I would call “morally right”, but it is a compromise, between fantasy and reality.

Here's a family secret that changed the course of my life: my grandfather had a “China mistress” (meaning a girl who comes from China). My grandma knew about her but kept it from us. The thing is, we are a Chinese family—we are Cantonese—and she probably believed that youngsters should not know about this kind of thing. How she actually found out, I don't know—I'm guessing she got the news through the grapevine, or through one of my grandfather's friends.

After my grandfather died, the mistress gave us hell. She came to the house when no one else was around and screamed at my grandma. She said that my grandfather left her some money and that she deserved to go to his funeral, that kind of thing.

Boy, if I had been home, some unfortunate things would have happened to this girl!

When I found out about the mistress, I was shocked. But the revelation made a profound impact on me: I realised that transactional sex may not be a perfect system, but maybe it *is* better than having a mistress. Why? Because the utmost priority for a wandering man should still be his children, his wife, his family. A mistress should be the absolute last priority—lower than a sex worker, pretty much—unless, of course, the man really doesn't have a conscience. A mistress is emotionally involved, too much even. People don't understand that hiring sex workers is the better of both evils.



These days, I'm living with my grandma. She's seventy-two and already forgetful about many things. She even fell several times while crossing the road (once I had to postpone a meeting with a client because I had to get her to a clinic!). It's just the two

of us, in an HDB flat in Pasir Ris. I see my mother once every four months and my father once a year—or whenever he bothers to visit me (or rather, my grandma—she's his mother), which is usually during Chinese New Year. Every year, I get two reunion dinners, one with each parent because they don't see each other! I don't have siblings, but cousins do drop by sometimes and stay with us.

I think my grandma suspects I'm a sex worker, so by now the other members of my family might know, too. She found my sex toys once, which led to a shouting match. And when she finds condoms all over my room, we often argue about it. Because I'm not exactly a passive person, I got aggressive and said, "Would you rather that I give birth out of wedlock or use a condom?" She threw things at me but I maintained my stance. Finally, I yelled at her: "If you want the money, shut the fuck up!"

My basic message to her is: "If you want me to take care of you, keep quiet." She understands that much but she is a selfish woman who is hard to love, who has hated me for half my life and made my life a

living hell. She compares me to my cousins who are ten years my junior.

“Well, they have parents who can teach them how to act and behave themselves,” she says, “not like you—you have no parents to teach you.”

She constantly said things like that to me until I was fifteen, so I grew up with low self-esteem. I also constantly victimised myself. I wasn’t the best-looking girl either, since I wore braces on my teeth (but I later fixed that with surgery).

I left this living arrangement once, but it didn’t end well. That’s why I put up with her. Back then, I left both my grandma and grandfather to live with my boyfriend for a year and a half. I have some regret about that, because my grandfather died in 2016, towards the end of my first year of escorting, and now I wish I had spent more time with him.

He died in Malaysia, so we needed money to ship his body back to Singapore, which cost a whopping \$10,000. Alternatively, we could have cremated his body and brought back the ashes; that would have cost more than \$1,000. We didn’t have either amount,

and that was when I saw first-hand how incredibly heartless my family can be. In the end, my grandma borrowed money to bring his body back. I was very upset because, actually, my grandfather’s family is rich (but, of course, he’s the poorest). These guys live in fucking landed property in Hong Kong and only gave \$1,000 for his funeral—surely they could have done better!

It was ugly to see the way my family chose to indulge their self-interest. I decided then that I needed money and that I would have to depend on myself to get it. Some people are so comfortable with their lives and can say that money isn’t important, but I disagree. Money is important and you need money to do things, and difficult situations can be resolved with money—there’s absolutely no doubt about that.

Ultimately, my grandfather’s death was most traumatising and that’s when I decided to keep working in the escort business. The whole importance of money, the significance of it, didn’t occur to me until something *that* major happened, and it was a real cataclysm.

And that's how I basically got here. What impacted my choices the most was my grandfather's death and my father's selfishness (which I'll go into in the next chapter). If I do ever leave sex work, I would wait until my grandma expires—which at her age could be anytime soon.

CHAPTER 2

**Good at
Faking It**

“I WAS BORN OUT OF WEDLOCK AND MY PARENTS SEPARATED.”



My first client was a Chinese guy in his mid-thirties. The meeting went smoothly and was fuss-free. It wasn't as dramatic as some people would imagine. When I met my agent afterwards, he asked me, "So, how do you feel? You didn't cry? You didn't make a scene?"

Not at all. The job was so vanilla: normal sex with a blow job. I was paid \$300, minus the agent fee. I never met the client again.

I told my agent: "Well, I responded to your advertisement knowing what I'm getting myself into, right? It was okay."

The agent later told me that he thought I was “a natural”.

I think that’s quite accurate—I wasn’t nervous or scared when I joined the agency. I even found that it was the perfect outlet for me. I mean, I liked having sex and the work allowed me to explore my sexuality, and it solved my money problems too.

The truth is I’ve always been sexually adventurous, without knowing why, and I still can’t explain it. Even today, when I wake up every morning, the first thing I do is reach between my legs. My hand automatically reaches for my vagina the way smokers reach for that first cigarette in a vital, compulsive motion, something you have to do to kickstart the day.

In fact, I openly tell people: “I don’t smoke, I don’t drink, I just have sex. My only drug of choice is sex.”

If someone were to ask me how I see myself, I would say I am easy-going and fairly open-minded and understanding. Sure, I’m good-looking but I am *not* what I look like. Many people say I must be a slut because I am clearly attractive and sexual but, honestly, I am boring in real life. (I go to school, I

go to work, I go home and the cycle repeats itself.) I don’t know what to say to people who think I’m a slut. What people don’t get is that when you meet a client, it’s not always physical; you have to talk to them and get to know them and there’s a whole emotional exchange.

Maybe this job works because I’m an introvert and it forces me to be outgoing. I can be very good at faking it. When I was younger, I was more extreme and my personality was a lot more duplicitous—so, in one sense, this was the perfect profession for me. The acting came almost naturally to me.

I probably first displayed this ability when I was much younger, only fourteen years old. I gained popularity by being two-faced in primary school: I pretended to be what people wanted me to be, and I was elected into the student council! That primary school has a motto, “Do Our Best”, and I certainly did my best then. I learnt to play people and it was the beginning of my real education. I was blunt and sarcastic, but at that age, my peers didn’t have the life experience to understand sarcasm, so I was just

an asshole and played everyone. Did that set me up for the future? You tell me.

And remember my dream of becoming an actress? I would've been so good at it. But those hopes were quashed early on because my parents only ever wanted me to be an office girl or get married and have two or three kids—the typical middle-class bullshit dream.

Now, here's where you want to know about my "loving" parents, right? Well, I was born out of wedlock and then my parents separated, so I had to fend for myself. As I've said, I live with my grandma and am putting myself through university with income earned from escorting. But growing up, I was pretty miserable because I was constantly bullied and humiliated. I was smaller than many girls at that age and my teeth were crooked—they needed to be aligned so I wore braces. Classmates took pleasure in teasing me, telling me I would never find a boyfriend because I was "so ugly".

I remember hating myself and hating school because I thought I was inferior to my peers—they had proper families, with two parents, and happy

lives. I was cynical, sarcastic and bitchy about life. It was pretty bad.

My father is unrestrained in his self-interest—he left us to start a second family, and he basically lives off women (like a gigolo, if I'm going to be mean). He's an immature man-child. He stopped financing my education after I turned sixteen, when he decided that he didn't care and made up all kinds of reasons ("You're not good at math, so you don't deserve an education...blah blah blah..."). So the less said about him, the better. I get that drama school can be expensive, but his decision to not put me through school hardened me so I could make my own way. I'm now in my final year of business studies in university. My mother makes an effort to help me with money sometimes—although very rarely.

I've been asked to imagine what my parents might think should they discover what I do for money. My honest answer is I have no idea. I would like to think they would have no objections, were it not for the fact that this kind of work is not considered socially acceptable. Lately, I think they have their suspicions,

Acknowledgements

My thanks go to Gerrie, for allowing me the chance to tell my story at such a young age in my sex work career. This would not have happened without you.

Ashley Chan

I am so thankful for having met Ashley at a party, and for the timing that has made this possible—for she was, at that point, willing to talk about her “hustling phase” and her “double life”. That resulted in the articles for the *Scarlet Harlot* blog, which, in turn, became this book.

Thanks go to Christina Doxstader, my editor of the *Scarlet Harlot* blog, and my readers who gave me feedback—Terrence Annamunthodo, Charmayne Highfield, Cyril Wong and Wong Hong Yi. A very special thanks to “Rhian” (for always being inspiring), “Vivienne” (for being a rock in a time of crisis) and Dana Duncan (for her

impeccable input on the artwork and, of course, all-around advice). A special word of appreciation to Scott W., for inviting me to the party where I met Ashley—even though he wasn't there himself!

My gratitude to my ever-trustworthy editor Eldes Tran and my new publisher (but old friend) Edmund Wee for their boundless enthusiasm—especially for a topic many thought too forbidding—and to Jael Ng for a fabulous cover.

And finally, to my partner PH, for her love and support—particularly during the coronavirus pandemic, when I did the editing and rewriting.

There's a famous anonymous verse that goes: "The shark is killed for its fin, the rhino is killed for its horns. The tiger is killed for its skin, what price the unicorn?" Here's an acknowledgement to unicorns everywhere, even in the world's oldest profession.

Gerrie Lim

Recommended Reading

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Community Resources

AWARE (Association of Women for Action and Research) provides support for women, educates the public on gender equality, and promotes equitable laws and policies.
www.aware.org.sg

Beyond Social Services is dedicated to helping children and youths from less privileged backgrounds break away from the poverty cycle.
www.beyond.org.sg

Brave Spaces provides support services for marginalised women through a dedicated helpline, social services, workshops and events.
www.bravespace.org (Helpline: 8788-8817)

Daughters of Tomorrow (DOT) supports underprivileged women in achieving financial independence and a better future.
www.daughtersoftomorrow.org

Humanitarian Organization for Migration Economics (HOME) is dedicated to supporting and empowering migrant workers who suffer abuse and exploitation.
www.home.org.sg (Migrant worker hotline: 6341-5535)

Project X provides counselling, practical advice, befriender services and education for women in the sex industry.
www.theprojectx.org

Samaritans of Singapore (SOS) is dedicated to providing confidential emotional support to individuals facing a crisis, thinking about or affected by suicide.
www.sos.org.sg (24-hour hotline: 1800-221-4444)

The Singapore Council of Women's Organisations (SCWO) is the national umbrella body of women's organisations and coordinates efforts to advocate for women's rights.
www.scwo.org.sg

About the Authors

Ashley Chan (a pseudonym) is an escort and a final-year university student in Singapore. She considers herself quiet and introverted—not quite the party girl—but she does enjoy the money, time and flexibility of her lifestyle. She measures 32B-24-35 and stands at 160cm, though she wishes she were taller.

Gerrie Lim is the author of seven books, including *Invisible Trade: High Class Sex for Sale in Singapore*; *Invisible Trade II: Secret Lives and Sexual Intrigue in Singapore*; and *Singapore Rebel: Searching for Annabel Chong*. He has a master's in print journalism from the University of Southern California, and was previously published in *Billboard*, *LA Style*, *LA Weekly*, *Penthouse*, *Playboy* and *The Wall Street Journal*.

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“Candid and intimate, by turns a dishy autobiographical exposé, this co-written memoir will shine an unpretentious light on a slice of Singapore seldom seen.”

—Cyril Wong, Singapore Literature Prize-winning author of *This Side of Heaven*

“Ashley Chan’s story bares all the trials and tribulations of reclaiming one’s sexuality in this hierarchical world we live in. I’m glad she lives to tell it.”

—Vanessa Ho, sex worker advocate and executive director of Project X, Singapore

The proposition is deceptively simple: clients pay Ashley to act out their sexual fantasies. The variations are endless, but the work is not easy. In an eye-opening, intimate memoir, Ashley Chan, 24, reveals the inside world of Singapore’s escorts and the inner turmoil that comes with it. One lesson she has learnt: bad things happen if you stay in the game too long.

Scarlet Harlot is written with Gerrie Lim, a veteran pop-culture journalist and author of *Invisible Trade: High Class Sex for Sale in Singapore*, *Singapore Rebel: Searching for Annabel Chong* and other books.

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ISBN 978-981-49-0130-7



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