

WORDS TO LIVE BY

Geisha Chikako Pari

By JUDIT KAWAGUCHI

Chikako Pari, whose stage name is Ichizuru, is the last geisha, also known as geiko, of a small town in Kyoto Prefecture. Her unusual last name, Pari — written in kanji — refers to the city of Paris and her French ancestry, although the details of her French great-grandfather's life were never revealed to her. Pari's happy childhood came to an abrupt end at age 12, when she was sold to a geisha house to pay off her father's debts. Though thrown into a vicious cycle of suffering and drama, both in her private life and as an entertainer, the ravishing and exotic Ichizuru managed to turn her situation into art and laughter. Today, she has plenty to smile about: She recently married a police officer who stole her heart 43 years ago, and the couple are still captivated by each other's charms.

Tears are useless. For a week after I was sold, I did nothing but cry. I was in shock at being torn away from my mother. I was just a little country bumpkin who spoke with a thick Osaka dialect, who was dragged and dropped into a gorgeous teahouse in Kyoto and left among cultured women who spoke eloquently, even when they were making fun of me. The *ochayasan* (teashop master) showed me how to clean the geishas' rooms. I didn't need a bucket of water: I had two waterfalls streaming from my eyes. I could have washed the room with my tears as I moved around, scrubbing and wiping those hard floors.

It's tough for a woman to make it in this world. Women are discriminated against, mistreated and discarded. One needs guts and brains to survive. If a woman has those, she'd better use them to find a strong, wealthy man to stand by her side.

Teaching styles change. I was hit a lot. All the *sensei* (teachers) carried long sticks with them and would whip us when we made mistakes. I'd get a sudden hit on my left wrist when I missed a chord on the shamisen, or a speedy slash on my right foot if I made the wrong move. They were hardest on those who had potential.

Never do anything half-baked! I was 15 when I had my first show performing the Komori, a dance full of humor. Being on stage was fun, so I decided that if I were to become a geisha, I'd be a good one.

If you owe someone money, they own you: Even if they treat you well, you're their slave. I began accumulating debts at the age of 12. The daily arts lessons, the gorgeous kimono and the beauty regimen were extremely costly. I owed a lot to the *ochayasan*, and it took me till I was 25 to break even.

Once ties are severed, even when we reconnect, we can never be whole again. After I paid off my debts and was free, I met my parents for the first time. I didn't think of them as my family anymore. I didn't feel any affection for my father. I couldn't respect him. But my mother was lovely. Still, in a distant way, I couldn't help but admire such a beautiful creature.

A woman never asks a man to marry her. When she's fun and attractive, he simply can't help but marry her.

Men who have money are all married — to someone else. I was popular, so I took my time to pick the man I wanted to be with. He turned out to be the president of the best Chirimen kimono company. Of course, he had a family. He spent most of his time and money on me though, so after a few years, it was over. It's always the money that gets in the way.

Once a man takes care of us financially, we like it and feel we owe him. Eventually we love him, as he is good to us. That's how the feelings of a lover are born.

A geisha may sit down on the tatami mat with a client, but it takes a lot more than just words and alcohol to get her into bed. Having sex before a lengthy courtship and many gorgeous presents is not proper for a lady. A man can be close to the prize yet still so far from the goal.

Men will pay more for a woman who doesn't have sex with them. *Ojorosan* were beautiful prostitutes, yet men were willing to pay three times more for a geisha, who wouldn't have sex with them. Of course, the hope was there.

Prostitutes deserve respect, as they do jobs few people can. On the street, we'd walk behind them, out of respect.

All men are single for a geisha. We never ask about our clients' families.

Humor is the greatest art of a geisha. We make men laugh, and since all our clients are smart, it's not easy to put them into stitches. A woman who can bring about laughter is loved and respected, because to get a repartee going she has to be smart and quick.

Having a very high price tag means picking your own customers. Anyone can pay for a cheap thing. But geisha are a luxury for the superelite. In other words, we geisha pick our own clients and we want the top 1 percent of society. If I am to sit with a man for hours, I want him to be witty, elegant and polite. The rich used to be that way.

Working will help you live a long and healthy life. I love my job so I'm alive and well.

When the time is right, do it right. My husband and I always loved each other, but when we met he had a wife. She lived in Kyoto and he stayed with me here. For 40 years! We didn't want him to get a divorce because his wife deserved a respectable, good life. When she passed away three years ago, we got married. He was 90 then, but still very handsome!

Marriage is better than living alone. I feel happy now. When I was young, I worked hard and things went well, but the war interrupted everything. Now we have enough to eat well and we have each other.

We can't argue if we use polite language. My husband and I use keigo together, it's the most polite form of Japanese expression.

Every story can have a happy ending. You just have to wait it out!

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