

BECAUSE SOMEONE IS ALWAYS WATCHING—TEN WAYS TO BE A PERFECT COURTESAN IN MUGHAL DARBAR

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1. On the rain swept floors, half-sit before the dance begins. Face soft, arms stretched. Gaze centered, measuring everything. The water drops are beads woven in your dark hair, a constellation. Let the fabric stick to your waist, your bosom poking through, the light drawn around your silhouette: incandescent edges, soft.
2. When the tattoo master draws the circle with an arrow in between, on your inner thigh, feel the prickling: allow the poison in the dye reach your nerves to see each sensation through. Rub sandalwood oil to your knees and elbows, sleep with socks filled with salt to massage your feet. They will bear the burden of the evenings to come.
3. Learn to play chess.
4. The art of smoking a hookah is a tough one, you'll find it disagreeable in the first few tries. Keep practicing until the sound of inhaling is neither too loud, nor absent, the effect of opium stable in your eyes. You are different from the rest, you have chosen this life: smooth marble floors that carry the weight of your art, bedsheets that sink with new creases on them every night.
5. Listen. Be seen. You are the centerpiece; you are the circle everyone wishes to enter.
6. In the court, bend like a delicate flower, let the men circle around you, enjoy the sharp touch of their finger pads on your pale skin. Gently take their hands to where you want them. Then close your eyes and remember the first time you saw a chandelier and were absorbed by its ability to bite light. Like it, solitude is your companion even though you are almost never alone.

7. In the dark of the bedroom, when the kings and queens make love to you, feel the air around you shudder. Then let your body knead the night and it will pass like the shadow of a flying bird. Remember their names, not their promises. Know that no one has loved them enough. Give them what they paid for.
8. Nawabs and Princes will come to you to learn *Tehzeeb*, the art of conversation. Suck their shy tongues and the pink out of their privates. Someday, they will turn into monsters who have killed their fathers and older brothers for the throne. Someday, they will stop by to smell your clit, live their past. Breathe on their power-burdened chest, between their war-weary legs, looking at the old remains of their innocence like flashing a flame in a darkened room. Split them apart like sunlight. Such liberty to watch them burst, then bundle up and grow quiet. This is the glimpse of a life everyone wonders about. You have it without domestication.
9. Never smile or sleep too much: you will end up with crow's feet, doughy neck and shapeless ass. Sometimes you may not be able to tell the difference between funk and want, between the moment that started this life and now. Don't panic, eventually, everyone gets ironed out into a layer of dirt.
10. Every morning, when you wake up, collect yourself like a bird, slightly shaken and aware. Sit upright on your bed. Let your hair loose. As the fresh breeze from the window sways the muslin curtain, watch the clouds wheeling in the sky not groping anything, even time. Walk barefoot in your garden. When the maids carry the hoses and spray water on the flower beds, fill your eyes with fragmented colors. Cover your mouth before a yawn arrives, not letting out a sound because someone is always watching, waiting for you to fall out of charm.