

{ SURVIVAL }



Not hurting

She's 56, she has cancer, she has bills to pay. So she started selling sex. By **Oliver Roberts**

Illustration: **Lizza Littlewort**

ON Sunday morning I go to see a call-girl who has cancer. She owes R70 000 for treatment so on January 1 this year she decided she was going to expand her massage and aromatherapy business to offer a little more. It's cancer of the spine. She's 56.

"I thought, 'You know what? Fuck it. I'm not hurting anybody, I'm not involved with anyone.'"

She's staying in a cottage attached to a house. She shows me around. The TV is on. The South African cricket team is losing to Pakistan. There's a dark room with a massage table. She tells me she has six diplomas in massage. The clients lie in here for 40 minutes and then go through to the bedroom. She likes to play classical music in the bedroom. It sets the tone. Back in the lounge I notice a stack of novels lined up on a table.

"Let's go sit outside because it's fucking hot in here," she says.

We sit next to the pool, which is green. It's not her fault. The owners of the house, they don't look after it. Still, she loves to swim. She loves to swim in the nude. She takes out her phone and shows me a picture someone took of her gliding naked under clear water.

I tell her I'm here to talk, to hear the story of her life. She's wearing small yellow shorts and a T-shirt that says Follow Your Heart. Her hair has grown back since the chemo but it's still slightly thinned. She keeps pushing her fingers through it. I'm not prepared for the story of her life.

"I was born in England. My mother and father were 13 and 14. They committed suicide an hour after I was born. No one ever came to pick me up. I got dumped in the orphanage. No one ever came to pick me up. I got fostered out, adopted... shocking experiences. I came to South Africa when I was 15,

I went to university. I got my Master's in psychology but I decided I couldn't, wouldn't, be able to charge somebody for their pain, so I went into counselling instead."

She still counsels. Rape and trauma counselling. Troubled teens. She now has guardianship of two girls down at the South Coast, where she lived before the cancer.

A three-legged dog is jumping up at my chair, trying to get my attention. The call-girl lights up a cigarette and basks a little in the sun. She's relaxed, open. She's ready to tell me everything, any-

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thing. Maybe I am too.

"Clients tell me they are unhappy," she says. "And it's not sex, it's touch, touch. After the massage I do a light feather tickle for 10 or 15 minutes and half of them fall asleep. When they wake up they say they just don't get that at home. At home, it's the water bill, electricity, pay the bond, pay this. It's nobody's fault. Maybe it's just society. But I do believe that women don't try very hard. All the wife has to do is give him an occasional fucking blowjob or a handjob and he

wouldn't be visiting me."

She reckons she's got to be "the oldest girl on the internet". She's no Miss South Africa, she says, but she's got her regular clients. They keep coming back, she says, because they get a quality treatment and they know that whatever they say to her will never go further. Never. Never, never. There are a lot of very lonely men out there. Very lonely. That's what she tells me.

"The men want kindness. Kindness. They actually give me a hug afterwards and say, 'Thank you. Thank you for caring for that hour and a half.'"

The lonely men, they know about her cancer. Some of them phone to find out how she is. Sometimes, when it's bad, she has to tell them not to hug her too hard because it hurts.

She had someone once. They were together 18 years. Two weeks before their wedding he got killed in a car accident. She's telling me this and I'm going, "What? Are you serious? Come on."

But she's OK. Look, it was a long time ago. She said they had 18 wonderful years. Most people can't say that, she says, very few. They can say, "We've been married for 30 years," but how many of those years have been bloody miserable?

That's what she thinks. She looked after him well, she says. He had a hard job. She did everything a wom-

an is supposed to do for her man.

She lights another cigarette. She says never mind the spine, it's lung cancer that'll get her in the end.

"A woman meets a man, is attracted to him, takes him out and then spends the next 10 years changing him into what she wants him to be, to fit him into her box," she says. "And in the 11th year, she divorces him because he's not the man she originally met. We change them, and then once we change them completely to what we want we go, 'Oh, I don't like him anymore.'"

'I look at other people's lives, the way they just chug along. I would shoot myself'

This is why she's in business. It's barely been three months and she's already got a regular flow of men. She won't see more than two a day, that's her rule. She wants to keep things intimate. She's not like some of the other girls, she says, who see five men a day. Imagine how that fucks you up?

She also won't see any man under 35. That feels incestuous. But her dilemma is that most of her calls come from men under 30. I tell her it's the older woman thing, the teenage fantasy about your maths

teacher or your mom's friend, droopy boobs and all. She lifts up her T-shirt and shows me her breasts, because they're not that droopy. I don't know why but now I'm telling her she should start accepting men under 30. It'll be good for business, I say. You'll pay off those hospital bills a lot faster and then you can stop doing this.

"I love my work," she says, "but there's part of me that wishes I could meet somebody, but karma will make that happen if it's meant to."

I ask her about the books on the table. She loves to read. Got to have a book in my hand. If she can't find one, she reads the dictionary. The library is one her favourite places. Sometimes, she just goes there to smell the old books. I tell her that her whole life is like a Raymond Carver story. She's never heard of him so I promise to write his name down, which I do, in a notebook full of other men's names.

She's travelled 32 countries. She's supposed to go for an MRI scan in three months to see what the situation is, if the cancer is back. But she's decided she's not going to go. She can't do it anymore, the treatment. She's had enough of it all.

"Now, I live. I'm 56. I've had a great innings, a great life," she says, stubbing out her cigarette. "I look at other people's lives, the way they just chug along and chug along. I would shoot myself. This, for me, is an adventure. And it's an adventure I'm loving because I'm being treated so well, like a princess. For now it's perfect. Who knows? Maybe in six months' time another adventure will come along."

One of her regulars will be here in 30 minutes, so it's time for me to leave. She needs to get ready. Out in the driveway, under the brightest sunshine, she opens her arms and I move in to hold her, remembering not to hug too hard. **LS**