



*Sex*  
in the  
*Hills*

WORDS NOEL PROBERT



*This story started with a rumour that a local business was moonlighting as a knocking shop. It begged the question – does the Adelaide Hills, a region better known for its food, wine and other sensual pleasures, have a sex industry? If so, what does it look like? How big is it? Who's selling? Who's buying? Is it even any of my business? I started asking around. And asking. And asking. When the answers finally started coming they were unexpected, thought-provoking and oddly reassuring...*



Lexie Mannion slips into a pub in the northern Adelaide Hills. She's wearing an overcoat, large sunglasses and what turns out to be a luxuriant blonde wig. She takes a seat at my table and asks, "Have you ever been to a sex worker?"

I'm caught off guard – I'm supposed to be asking the questions here – and mutter something about it not really being my thing. "Perhaps you just need the Lexie touch," she says, arching an eyebrow and laughing gently at my obvious discomfort.

Ice broken, the interview goes easily from here. I was hoping to get half an hour of her time, perhaps an hour if I was lucky, but Lexie is entertaining company and we spend two hours talking about sex, small towns and keeping secrets. We could go on but we both have to pick up our kids from school.

Lexie is her working name, but her friendly, personable nature is real and possibly her most important professional asset. "I'm always happy to listen. I've had guys come to me and we've had no sexual interaction," she says. "I've just sat there with my arms around them while they're in tears, then

to provide her services for between \$350 and \$500 an hour.

Lexie has a normal job and fits her sex work around this and family commitments. "But I enjoy getting paid for sex," she says frankly. "I only [do sex work] fortnightly and after my week off I'm ready to get back into it..." She pauses for a moment, laughs. "Gee, I hope my mum doesn't read this!"

For the last three years Lexie, who is in her late thirties, has worked across the Hills and Barossa, and more recently in an apartment in the CBD. Her clients are a varied bunch, but there's one common trait.

"Ninety-five percent of my gentlemen are married," she says. "They're not running away and having an affair. A lot of them love their wives to bits, they love their families. There's just one thing they're not getting. One man I saw was a carer for his wife, they didn't have a sexual relationship. I have another client whose wife knows what he does – she can't provide for his particular needs and she's accepted it as long as it's with someone private and not in a brothel."

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they leave with a weight off their shoulders. I've had one gentleman who I'd text occasionally just to see if he was okay. A lot of guys are struggling and they need to know that booze and drugs aren't the answer."

It's not quite what I was expecting. For much of the time it's like interviewing a social worker. She talks about depression and suicide among rural men, about the needs of the elderly and disabled in the community.

"I see men of all sizes, shapes and colours," she says. "Obese, skinny, disabled, Asian, old, young – I don't discriminate against anybody. Everyone is entitled to have their needs met, to have that connection with someone else."

Of course, sex is the primary objective and Lexie is quite happy

Most of Lexie's clients are in their 50s and 60s, and she gets plenty of demand from men considerably older. "A client I was seeing until recently was in his 90s," she says. "When we met it was like all his Christmases had come at once."

Working in the close-knit communities of the Hills and Barossa means Lexie keeps a low profile, hence the wig and glasses. A couple of her girlfriends know of her life as Sexy Lexie, but her family and workmates in her day job are kept in the dark.

"People judge you as soon as they know what you do," she says. "But what's the difference between picking up a random guy at the pub and doing it for money?"

Lexie is discreet, but not that hard to find. A simple internet search yields her website, along with half a dozen other

women offering services in the Hills. But unless you go looking for it, the industry in the region is practically invisible.

SA Police declined to comment on any aspect of their policing of the sex industry, but a former vice squad officer told AHM that he'd never heard of any brothels in the Hills. "The only thing we ever got was escorts being driven up the hill," he says. "The car would be parked outside while the girl went in to do the business. We'd get a call saying 'There's a strange car parked outside...' We'd go along and the driver would be evasive about what he was doing. Eventually we'd work out he was waiting for the escort to finish her work. But it's not illegal to be a prostitute, and it's very hard to prove wrongdoing."

Another reason for the low profile is the policy of the biggest local newspaper when it comes to advertising. "The *Courier* won't let me," Lexie says. "They won't have a bar of it. They refuse to put that type of advertisement in the paper."

It's fair, however, to assume there has always been some level of sex trade in the Hills, even if there isn't a lot of written evidence for it. There's no reason to think this region was any different to the rest of the colony, and early Adelaide was notable for the prevalence of 'The Social Evil', as it was known. The Register of 15 April 1843 published a complaint from a concerned reader:

*"Can you inform me how long the neighbourhood of Weymouth [sic] Street and Light Square are to be infested with brothels, and when the inhabitants are to be rid of the music, dancing, revelry and the mob of drunken blacklegs who idle about there all day and live on plunder and prostitution at night?"*

Basket Range historian Geoffrey Bishop has spent years researching local history and hasn't seen any documents referring to the sex industry in the region. "I haven't looked but I haven't found anything by accident," he says. "In the goldfields in the 1880s there were a lot of illegal alcohol sellers and gambling operations. It's reasonable to assume there was prostitution too. Where there are men working away from home it seems to attract that kind of activity.

"A lot of the families around here were pretty poor and opportunities would've been minimal. Until the 1940s, no girls from the district had ever been to high school – girls either went into domestic service or got married young."

There's not much on paper, but nothing travels like gossip, which can quickly become oral history and carry on over generations. Bishop tells a story relating to prostitution in Basket Range while men worked on the sealing of the Adelaide to Lobethal road around 1927. There's also the tale of Two-Bob Harriet, who set tongues wagging in the 1930s when she re-entered a dance at the Forest Range Hotel with her dress on inside-out.

More recently, a Hills hairdresser was said to be providing extras to selected clientele; the salon apparently relocated after some strong words from an irate wife.

All of the stories have one thing in common – a degree of separation. I've heard... I'm told... Apparently... A bloke at the pub told me... In spite of the statistical likelihood that at least 15 percent of men will have paid for sex at some point in their life, friends, colleagues and acquaintances aren't terribly forthcoming on the topic. Several of them however, mention hearing 'something from someone' about an industrial property in Mount Barker that offers services atypical of its stated field of endeavour.

Intrigued, I speak with a friend who works nearby. "That explains everything!" she says. "I thought it was odd that there have been sports cars going in and out lately – it's always been just utes and vans and trailers!"

Since gossip and innuendo aren't enough to build a story, I ask Jason Duffield what he knows. Jason's family has been running motels in Hahndorf for 30 years, so I figure he's seen more than most.

"One night I was filling in as sleepover manager at the Old Mill," he says. "A local bloke I knew came back to his room with a girl on his arm. Let's just say he was very surprised to see me."

Jason recalls a few cases of short-term visitors taking rooms for a couple of hours, but discretion is as important for hoteliers as it is for harlots, so he leaves me with the words of Sir Les Patterson: "If you're feeling the urge, ask the old concierge."

Aside from the odd amateur value-adding operation and outcall escorts from metropolitan Adelaide, it appears that sex workers in the Hills are mostly private, professional, independent women who are choosy about their clientele. They're also choosy about who they talk shop with. At first, Lexie appears to be the only exception to that rule.





Most sex workers don't return my calls; two only respond to decline my requests for interviews.

Then Mia (neither her real name nor her working name) agrees to talk with me...

Mia, 31, is an escort who has been servicing Hills clients for three years. She screens her clients, rejecting intoxicated, aggressive or unpleasant individuals. "I'm very selective," she says. "Because I've been doing this for so long I can tell from their phone manner how they will be. I don't work nights – that's when you get the drunks – and because my price is higher, people are more discreet. A lot of people with money are well-known in the community, they need to be discreet."

She's coy about her pricing, but says you get what you pay for and she personally wouldn't be comfortable with anyone charging less than \$300 an hour.

As in Lexie's case, many of Mia's clients are seeking something more than sex. "A good number of my clients are older," she says. "A lot of them have lost their wives. Some are still married but don't have that kind of relationship with their wives anymore; some of those wives know their husbands see me. He'll be here with me while she goes off and does the shopping."

And like Lexie, Mia also says '95 percent' of her business is with married men. "It's a basic human need," she says. "To be with the same person forever, I don't think it's really viable."

Working in a small community can have its drawbacks. "At the gym I see [clients] with their partners. That can be awkward, more for them than me. If I'm out to dinner and I see a client come in with his family, I'll just move."

Mia says she started sex work for the money, but that isn't the reason she keeps at it. "I enjoy it. I didn't have plans to do it for as long as I have, but I've made friends. I enjoy catching up with people. You have to be smart about it, make sure no one else is affected by it."

As the deadline for this piece sails by, two more women contact me.

Abbey, 28, moved to the Hills to live and work. Her initial reservations about working in the area proved unfounded. "It's not as small as I first feared," she says. "Because I don't really know anybody, nobody's paying attention. I don't roll up wearing fishnet stockings with a flashing red light on my head!" Abbey has a degree, she works part-time in a regular job and is startling for her normalcy: she fits in with the community, a working mum who volunteers at her kids' private school.

Flying under the radar isn't quite as easy for E, 24, who grew up, and still resides in, the Hills. Like Mia, she requests that even her work name is kept out of print. "To work in my home town is precarious to say the least," she says. "As a precaution

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I will never work in the Hills, always in the city. Unless there's a regular client I've developed a rapport with, then I'll meet him at his home."

E started sex work at 21, saying it was "something I had always wanted to do". She plans to save money and buy property, but isn't in any rush to get out of the industry. "I didn't think I would like it this much. But my clients [have] become lovers, friends – so much so that I still get butterflies every time."

It seems that in the Hills, the sex industry, like wine and food, is a boutique affair. For men with a hankering for sex and the money to pay for it there are women who will fulfill every need. You've probably met one of them – taken a gym class with her, exchanged pleasantries with her in the supermarket, sat next to her at the bar, chatted with her at the school gate. And if you haven't met the women, you've definitely met some of their clients. One thing is certain, the oldest profession is closer than you might think, more complicated than you might think and it isn't going away any time soon. But I'll let Lexie have the last word.

"If I can change one person's perspective and make them happy, that makes me happy. I'm just a normal human being. I've got feelings like anyone else. I just choose to do something that some people look on as dirty. I'm not acting like a cheap slut. I treat the gentlemen with complete respect and I expect the same. I treat them caringly and lovingly, we have a relaxing and enjoyable time so they leave thinking, "That's just what I needed." \*

## The law and other problems

It's not illegal to have sex for money in South Australia, but almost everything surrounding the transaction can be interpreted as an offence. Soliciting, receiving money in a brothel, allowing premises to be used as a brothel, living on the earnings of another person's sex work – all are illegal.

"South Australian laws date back to the Summary Offences Act from 1930," says Ari Reid from the Sex Industry Network. Ari has spent years advocating for law reform. "Decriminalisation is what we're after. Remove all the laws that criminalise what we do so we can have access to existing laws around occupational health and safety, pay and conditions."

Ari says the existing legal situation works to keep women in the industry by making it more difficult to find employment in other fields. It also exposes workers to greater risk of assault and exploitation.

"Exploitation occurs in every industry, that's why there are unions," she says. "Decriminalisation isn't going to fix everything, but it will give us some tools to work with. Practically, the law has an impact on how we operate, particularly regarding safety. For example, we can't discuss what's included, and what isn't, with clients beforehand. All we can say is that it's a fully inclusive service and hope they understand what that means. A lot of workers will just say it anyway, but if you say it to an undercover cop, that answer can get you arrested."

The frequently negative portrayal of the sex industry in both news media and popular culture is unfair, Ari says. "Sex workers are very forgiving, very accepting. Lots of people look at the industry and point out how many workers are single parents, how many have mental health problems, how many use drugs. I say perhaps it's that sex work gives people dealing with these issues the flexibility they need. Perhaps it's that other industries aren't flexible or welcoming enough."

Sex workers have to pay tax on their earnings, even though their right to that income is legally denied them. "We've got the worst of both worlds," Ari says. "We're criminalised and we're expected to pay tax."

Several attempts to reform the law have failed since the Act was updated in 1953. "South Australia has a proud history and self-identity as being progressive," says Ari. "We're really letting the side down with this one. There's not a lot of opposition to reform, except from the usual quarters. But not many people are prepared to stand with us either."