

Need a deft hand? Dial a man

By Ruth Ostrow

IT was summer when Jim first turned up, wearing his Akubra hat and a shirt he'd torn for ventilation.

His legs were as firm as tree trunks from doing masculine things in the mud, and I just knew that he knew what to do with the lumps of wood that were sitting on my balcony waiting to be banged together.

In the way that only true men can, he effortlessly slung the wood over his shoulder before doing things with screws and drills that he produced from a tool-belt hanging just below his muscle-bound hips. I watched him work that day, poking his fingers into some things, banging at others, and I thought my heart would explode from yearning.

Instead, I did what all lassies do when their tradesman come over to fix their messy lives. I threw on my sexy, red dress with the plunging neckline and dashed about offering him cups of tea with Tim Tams, and making a terrible nuisance of myself. When I accidentally stood between him and a plank of wood, I almost got banged by mistake.

The secret truth is every woman appreciates a good bloke, the way a connoisseur appreciates a good wine, or a chocoholic does a Belgium praline.

Those suntanned Aussie boys with skimpy shorts and dangling, vibrating bits. Those irrepressible males with cheeky grins that speak of many a day banging more than planks of wood together under the house. The sort of man who makes you want to throw open your bonnet for a grease-n'-oil change.

So it came as no surprise to learn that a friend was planning to start a rent-a-bloke service to provide a bit of muscle power for the female population.

My friend, who has declined to be named, but who runs a well-known real estate agency, says she got the idea from reading a book years ago where the heroine wasn't coping after the death of her husband, so she started a company of blokes who could visit lonely, older women and do the tasks once carried out by their menfolk.

These tasks included traditional fix-it jobs, but also all the odd jobs expected of a male partner: helping put the lights on the Christmas trees, opening a tight jar, fixing a broken zipper, or just popping in for a beer and a ciggie to check all was well -- as a good bloke will do.

"I noticed that many of the properties we handle are for single mothers, women living on their own, or women who haven't got the stamina to manage the houses and gardens they're in. These women really need someone to come around with a tool-belt and fix things up," she says. Power tool jokes aside, she says she knows many women of an older age who quite seriously need someone to fetch something in, or help with things.

"There are so many services that cater for men in need, the sort of Dial-an-Angel, rent-a-wife service providing domestic and general assistance for single dads or

the travelling businessman. It struck me that why can't women just rent a 'back' to help them carry the load?"

Through her feminist leanings she believes that women are as capable of wielding an axe as men are of running a home: "But the fact is that many women are busy working and rearing children and haven't the time nor energy for extra chores.

"If there can be domestic services for men, then let there be rent-a-backs for women: husband substitutes," she says, as I nod in absolute approval.

While she is rounding up blokes for her national team, I have heard of at least two operations also honing in on this market, Hire-A-Hubby which started in Melbourne four years ago and the recently established Men at Work, which was set up by an art teacher two years ago. Col McKenzie, who's Men At Work services the NSW north coast, says that he and his blokes charge \$20 per hour to do tradesman stuff, but will also happily do odd jobs for the working, older or single woman.

Though he originally set his company up for hard yakka, once word of his talents got out he was surprised at how many calls he started getting from women needing someone to program the video, mow the lawn, help bath the dog, or simply poke about in rattling places.

Col, who teases that he will often turn up in his skimpy shorts, says, "The funniest story I had recently was a woman who called because the lights in her home weren't working. When I got there it was clear that she hadn't turned up the dimmers. I got such a laugh out of this one I didn't even charge."

He has moved furniture, and helped decorate homes. One client, an elderly lady, pays him just to come over for a chat. "Men have been hiring women to talk to for years. We both pretend I'm there to do the gardening and she tells me about her life. She is very lonely."

He once helped a woman whose husband was stuck in the toilet. After Col got him out, she whispered: "I should have left him in there."

And one recent client needed a light bulb changed, a five-minute job. "She said, 'Would you mind looking after the kids for a few moments while I dash down the street?' She was gone for over an hour. I ended up baby-sitting three young kids and watching videos.

"The bulk of our work is still the heavy stuff we do for large clients, the regular tradesman stuff, but we are increasingly getting into doing the small things that make life easier for women: washing the car, raking the leaves.

"We'll basically do anything for them. We are multi-talented," he says as I burst into laughter.

Husbands are not horrified, as one would expect, at the sight of their wives tearing across the garden in sexy gowns towards their blokes.

Because while the thought may elicit a slight sniff of jealousy, the alternative is much worse.

My girlfriend recently approached her partner holding a large axe she found in the shed and told him to chop some firewood for kindling. His eyes glazed over.

"Can't you call Jim?" he asked, knowing that all the girls who use Jim's services have a terrible crush on him. It was a clear choice: his wife's fidelity or hours of chopping wood. The answer was never in doubt.

Somehow I think that if my friend gets her national dial-a-bloke service off the ground, the main people calling for help will be husbands.

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