

Christchurch sex workers: Life on Manchester St

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No little girl dreams of this dressing room. Anna hunches on the concrete beam scratching around in her bag for her high heel boots.

The ground is a mat of shingle and damp dirt.

Even the weeds have given up trying to grow in this dank corner of Christchurch's red light district. A digger tyre serves as Anna's vanity table. On it rests a sparkly card holder full of condoms.

It is bitter July night in Christchurch - the kind of cold that eats through each layer of clothing. But instead of putting clothes on, Anna is taking them off.

She is a prostitute on Manchester St.

She shivers, but it is barely noticeable from her hands that are shaking, because Anna, 25, is dependent on alcohol.

"We all put on a show on how we can do this," she says. "But yeah, it's hard."

Anna is eloquent, something she attributes to her "posh" state school background.

At 16, she abandoned school, instead working on and off on the street. "When I last worked it would have been four or five years ago. The amount of girls is, like, triple now. It's because of housing," she says.

This time around she has been out here for three months.

It is 6.04pm. Time to walk to her spot outside Vision College.

Ever since the heels went on, she is harder, swaggering and defiant.

She "hates herself" for being back out here.

"I'm darker. A lot harder, like putting up a wall. I have more of a stone for a heart than a heart, I guess," she says flinching as she looks away, her fingers itching for a cigarette that isn't there. She stares down the street. Over the next year Anna will attempt to leave Manchester St twice.

Since the 2011 Christchurch earthquakes, working girls have had their patch reduced from about two kilometres, down to 360 metres between Bealey Ave and Salisbury St. Road works have forced "Peterborough" girls down with those who work the patch closer to Bealey Ave.

Elly, Mel and Leigh work down from Anna, sometimes at the bus stop and sometimes in front of a church.

Tonight they are lined up on a low concrete fence, like children waiting to get their photo taken, feet kicking the pavement.

Cars drive past slowly, some who will drive up and down all night without purchasing.

Others ask for prices because they don't "have the guts" or get enough of a thrill off just asking, says Leigh.

Girls disappear behind bushes. There are no toilet facilities for the girls. The nearest are Cathedral Square but are locked at night.

Leigh, Mel and Elly live in an abandoned house.

Anna lives about 40 minutes walking distance away from the street, on an empty section, in a tent. The sneakers in her bag are for the walk home.

Along with this group there are between three and eight more workers on the street most nights.

The girls are glum tonight. It's winter and very cold. Business is slow.

"God we are so lazy. Look at us we aren't even trying, c'mon," says Leigh, trying to buoy the girls.

Anna is further down the street, the clonk . . . clonk . . . clonk of her heels echoing on the deserted street.

A car pulls up slowly.

The driver becomes the subject of intense scrutiny by the three young women.

"Why isn't Anna going up to him?" asks Mel.

Anna, in two inch heels, technically has the "job". The car pulled up near her.

But she is smoking; gazing down Manchester St, walking the same tired patch.

The three women eye up the car.

Out here a man equals money.

"Well, someone has to do him," points out Leigh, lighting up a cigarette.

Mel stubs out hers and strides down to the car, slinging her bag over a shoulder.

She is back in a couple of minutes, grinning.

"He was on the phone talking to his wife," she says laughing.

"You probably gave that poor man a heart-attack," scolds Leigh.

The girls clutch at each others shoulders laughing helplessly.

The lack of jobs plus the lack of synthetic cannabis in their pockets soon subdues them.

"I am not leaving until I do crack it, even if it's just a \$40 or \$60. Just for sessions in the morning," says Elly.

She runs up to a pole and swings around it. She doesn't laugh.

Elly wanted to be a vet when she was a little girl.

Her hand gently strokes the soft golden hair of a puppy that lies licking her hand.

It is early September. She and Leigh have shifted out to the abandoned section with Anna. Elly was sick of her seeing her money "go up in smoke" - used to buy synthetic cannabis for everyone at the house.

Elly knew she wasn't equipped to be a vet.

"I didn't want to watch animals die or be in pain. Then I wanted to be a doctor but I couldn't handle someone dying on me." Elly knows what it is like to be a "pet".

She "was sold" at age eight to an older man at the end of the street.

"I used to come home in my school uniform, sometimes my aunty had already a dress picked out.

"It was a really elderly man. He was really lovely to me. It wasn't the usual typical vigorous I want sex from you and that's it," she says.

"There was a part of me that was okay with it because I didn't have to be around my family," she says.

The puppy nuzzles her with his nose.

"He used to make cards with me too," she says, her voice trailing off.

She went through 200 homes from age 12, put there by the state. Her mum died when Elly was three. Her dad abandoned her for a gang.

"Honestly those homes could work but it was me," she says.

At age 14 she had already been in and out of brothels. She has been raped more than once.

"It's not nice, it never is," she says.

Now 18, she lives and works on the streets.

"I don't blame anyone else for what I do. That is my own choice. It's because I know how to do it," she says.

She has thought about what she could be but getting there would take a "s*** load of synthetics".

"I'd be a youth worker for the courts. There are a lot of people who fall through the systems. I'd send them to know how to use needles cleanly, send them to the doctor, drive them around to their appointments, just being that extra support. Like getting them to counselling so they aren't being picked up by probation and getting into trouble," she says.

"This is what I need," she adds.

She curls up in the tent, takes the bong off her friend, inhales and slowly goes to sleep, peeking every so often.

Three women from a nearby church wander down the street every Friday night.

Conversation with Anna and the other girls is at best awkward but they are kind and non-judgmental.

As they get ready to move on, one always reminds each girl of a coffee morning they run.

She knows the girls like chocolate so without fail and no matter how many times the girls don't show up, she buys it in the hope one day one of the girls will show up.

Anna thinks the trio are nice.

"They try to 'save you'. Sweetheart, if I could be saved I would have been already," she says with a wry smile.

Anna has had three jobs this week. All those hours spent walking the pavement, smoking incessantly, has amounted to less than \$120.

After five months she has become "old meat".

It was the same when she was younger. A lot of jobs in the beginning, then trouble eking an income from then on in.

As a 16 year old she started because her friends did it to get rent money.

Her reasoning was since she had been raped by her brother from age nine she "may as well get paid for it". She told her school counsellor at 15. Her mum sat in the counsellor's office heaving with sobs. Then she hissed at Anna: "I'm going to lose my son because of you." Anna's voice trails off.

"I couldn't do it any more, so I left," she says very quietly. Her hand itches for a damned cigarette by her side.

A girl is weaving between the pavement and the road, a flowing dress hitched up. Anna knows her.

She is on morphine, quite common out here.

Some workers do a job, shoot up then once it wears off head back out to do another job.

The girl is friendly and nice.

She asks if Bridget has a cigarette to spare, before she continues weaving down the footpath looking for cigarette butts.

She stops suddenly and yells : "This f***** street!"

It is March. Elly no longer has her golden puppy.

She gave it up. She cannot look after it.

Elly left the abandoned section and has been arrested three times for being in vacant buildings.

It is hard to talk to her at the moment. She has been living in a world created by synthetic cannabis, her eyes seemingly permanently glazed.

She is slipping away. Her gentle spirit has been struck by the death of Corey McLean, 16, one of her best-friends, in a house fire, September 13, 2014.

He was funny, cheeky and with huge empathy, she says. Her friend and "watcher", J is not doing much better.

J is the information centre on Manchester St. He has brown fluffy hair, pinchable cheeks and a great wit about him to boot.

There are watchers, minders and pimps on the street. Watchers don't take any money off the girls, minders take a little "protection money" and pimps put the girls to work and take most of the money, he explains.

Since the Mallory Manning case, J says there have not been any pimps out on the streets. Mallory was killed in 2008. A Mongrel Mob prospect was found guilty and imprisoned for the murder in 2014. J lives in an abandoned building with some of "the boys" and Leigh and Elly.

He is a charmer, who loves to sing. Most watchers and minders are boyfriends, says J.

"It hurts them to see them out here, knowing what they are going to go do with a client. First time I saw one of the girls get in the car I wanted to bash the guy's head in. But they told me, this is their job. It's like if I came and bashed your boss."

"People think they are dirty women. I always thought that's what prostitutes were until I came out here. I've met four or five girls out here who don't do drugs, drink but are \$100 short on rent," he says.

He takes out a pouch and starting rolling a combination of tobacco and synthetic cannabis.

"Out here is for making sure we can forget. Girls put in hospital at eight years old because of their old man, sexually abused, f***** up shit eh." He lights up.

"Yup there aren't too many happy stories out here."

J disappears for a while after that night. In January he is back. His hair is now black, his face hard. He has been in jail twice for squatting in abandoned buildings and "other stuff". True to form, he already knows the latest from the street.

It is grim.

Two girls have been hurt by clients, others arrested for fighting with each other.

"It's a lot different out there now," he says.

"People are just getting jealous of some of the girls being picked up and some of them not. The cops showed me the high resolution cameras that they have put in. Man, those things can see all the way down the street," he says, impressed.

With all the wisdom of his 18 years, J surmises: "I think the streets are just getting to everyone now. All these dramas building up and people are letting it out when they shouldn't."

"Minders have gotta take action [on clients] that is what it comes down to. Punch them in the head get the money off them and give it to the girl," he says.

Like Elly, he is still trying to cope with the loss of his friend. He is smoking a lot of synthetics and drinking.

He doesn't smile much any more.

One of the minders has had a lot to drink. His words explode out of him, like they have been festering in his mind since we first met six months ago.

"What will you writing about the girls change for them? Eh? They will still live here, have to work there and you'll have a story," he roars.

He has a point. This is a grotesque merry-go-round that few will get off permanently.

Anna is not working anymore. Leigh, Elly and Mel still are but the distance to the street to the abandoned section means Elly is telling her regular clients to come to the section.

"It was killing me, being out there," says Anna.

Leigh has been in jail once, Elly is probably heading there soon, for a combination of squatting in abandoned houses and alleged burglaries. Anna is living off the proceeds of crime, burglaries committed by others. She is stuck at the moment, unable to even get a benefit, because she has no I.D and no address, she says. So she keeps living at the section, collecting her firewood for her cooking fire, drinking. Sitting on a threadbare couch, reading Angels & Demons by Dan Brown with the ever present cigarette in her hand.

Relieved.

Tess, 21, wishes her family and friends would come and take her off Manchester St. They wave at her instead. She pulls self consciously at the long t-shirt, so threadbare it is almost see through, pulled down serving as a mini-skirt.

She is new to Manchester St - one of many.

It is March and the road works that were causing a clog up of working girls towards Bealey Ave have opened up.

Leigh is in jail. It is unknown what for but she will be away for six months is the gossip. Tess feels her absence keenly.

Leigh helped her when she first came out here, even giving Tess her own spot at the bus stop. Tess is getting used to people leaving. Her mum handed over a 24-month- old Tess to her own mother and left.

"She was a junkie and an alcoholic," shrugs Tess.

But Grandma was the best. Two years ago she died. Cancer.

"We knew she was sick, she just slowly went. It was horrible," she says.

"She was everything, she was my real mum," she says.

Grandma would have came and got her off the street, says Tess wistfully, pulling at her t-shirt again.

Anna recognises Tess.

"It is amazing how many people you see out here that I grew up with," she says.

Anna has been back out working. She needed booze and drugs to "numb up".

"We try to find firewood and then end up looking up ourselves and thinking:

'I don't want to be like this'. I live in a tent how depressing is that? So we numb up."

She is upset today, hitting the booze hard.

"You know, we didn't dream of doing this when we were little girls,' she says, drawing on her cigarette.

The plume of smoke curls in the air, dancing away from her.

"We only do what we can to survive, to have a life like normal people do. We don't start being junkies and alcoholics but only ended up like that so we could numb up out here."

She has a plan though.

She is going to head up north to do some apple-picking.

But in March she is still in Christchurch.

Things have not gone to plan; she has to finish her periodic detention and keeps missing it.

She draws on her cigarette again.

"This ****ing street," she murmurs.

*Real names are not used due to the stigma of being a street worker and the impact it could have on future employment opportunities.

- Stuff

<http://www.stuff.co.nz/the-press/news/67610160/christchurch-sex-workers-life-on-manchester-st>