

MY NIGHT WITH THE VICE SQUAD

Crime writer Lindsay Ashford tells how a real-life encounter with prostitutes changed her life

It's 8.30pm at Wolverhampton's Bilston Street police station. There's a hard frost on the cars outside but the girl coming down to the lock-up is wearing shorts. Kerry has long red curly hair, bulbous green eyes and a double chin. Beneath her cut-off denim shorts she wears black knee-high boots. A black polo-neck top and matching leather jacket complete the outfit. Kerry has been a prostitute for five years. Tonight she has been arrested, along with two others, for soliciting in Wolverhampton's red light district.

She tells me that on a typical night she earns between £40 and £70. I am surprised. This is much less than I thought. I expected her to say £150 - £200. She reels off prices for the services she offers. £15 for full sex in a punter's car; £20 for full sex at her own home; £30 for full strip and sex; £40 for full strip and sex plus oral sex; £50 for full strip, sex, oral sex and a massage (half an hour in total).

The second girl, Michelle (29), is dressed less provocatively in a long tan suede jacket and is plump but not fat. She is a former psychiatric patient and has four children, but none of them live with her. She says she was forced into prostitution by a pimp, from whom she escaped by going to live and work in Scotland for a year. While there she met girls with HIV, but made sure her punters always used condoms. All three say they would never have sex with a punter without a condom.

The third girl, Natalie, is 21. She is dark, pretty and quite shy-looking. She has been a prostitute for two and a half years. She has two children aged four and seven months. She tells me she worked for a pimp but managed to shake him off by going to live at her sister's house for a while. She was terrified of him finding her but by the time she ran into him again he had found a girl to replace her and didn't care that she had run away. She says she would like to get out of prostitution before her children are old enough to find out what she does.

All three girls smoke continuously but all deny any involvement with drugs. They say a lot of other Wolverhampton prostitutes do take drugs – especially crack cocaine, and as a result the whole vice scene in the city has changed over the past eighteen months. The crack girls are desperate for money to feed their habit and so have dropped the prices. They will also offer more 'deviant' forms of sex.

'They want anal for a tenner,' says Kerry, disgustedly.

'I tell 'em if they want that they can go and find themselves a boy,' says Michelle, equally disgusted. These girls are the 'old-fashioned' type of prostitute – only prepared to offer vaginal, oral and 'hand relief' to their clients. They are being forced to charge less for their services because of the 'crack girls' undercutting them.

Another girl, Jade, is with the doctor. She has revealed to charge officers that she is pregnant. She is eighteen and has been working as a prostitute for six months. The charge officers think she is on crack. I am unable to interview her because she is still with the doctor when the other three girls leave. I follow them up the stairs, watching Kerry's lycra-clad buttocks bulging and swaying in her denim shorts. Out they go into the freezing cold night, straight back onto the streets to carry on working.

When I asked them about drugs, Kerry had said, 'This is a drug in itself – prostitution is like a drug. You go up town and see something you want and you think, if I go out tonight I can have that. That's how it gets you.'

When the girls have gone the vice squad sergeant takes me on a tour of the red light district in 'the vice car' – an unmarked police vehicle well known to most of the women on the streets. He pulls up at the corner of Cable Street and Steelhouse Lane. Two sisters, Marie and Tracy, are soliciting there. They jump into the car without the sergeant even having to say anything. They expect to be arrested, but he offers them a deal. He won't arrest them if they allow me to ask a few questions. They are very suspicious of my motives, but finally agree to co-operate.

Marie is 25, and even in the semi-darkness of the lamp-lit street she looks rough. Her face is scarred – presumably from the many beatings she has received from her pimp/boyfriend. Tracy is a year younger and says she has been a prostitute for seven years. She has a different pimp - the sergeant later informs me that he is not as violent as her sister's – and she looks in much better shape. Both girls have children and live with their mother in a nearby council estate. 'It's a horrible place,' the sergeant tells me later. 'Your feet stick to the carpet as you walk through the door.'

Both girls say they are unable to break away from their pimps. When I suggest they move to another area, like Michelle, who went to Scotland for a year, they dismiss it as an unrealistic option. 'Why should I leave?' asks Marie, 'Why should I leave my home for him?'

'Yes,' Tracy agrees, 'Why should I take my daughter out of school where she's happy?'

Marie tells me she met her pimp at school. Tracy met hers 'through friends'. Marie has been to prison five times; Tracy four. Both deny ever having taken drugs.

They say they always have sex with punters in the client's car – never at home because their mother wouldn't allow it, although she knows what they do. I ask them about their pimps, and the sergeant chimes in: 'I'll tell you what happens: they work out here till about midnight, go home, and about one or two o'clock in the morning their pimps call round for the money – right girls?'

I ask if they would carry on working if they ever managed to get away from their pimps. 'If I ever got away I'd do it once a week,' says Tracy, 'cos I'm dead lazy.' They get out of the car, complaining that they're fed up of working tonight because 'it's bloody freezing'. I thank them and as a parting shot they say there's 'lots more' they could tell me, nodding at the sergeant as they speak. 'You know where to find us,' they shout.

My tour continues. We stop in Causer Street, where I see an old, scruffy-looking woman sitting on a low car park fence next to an Asian youth. This is Sheila. The sergeant tells me she is in her forties, an alcoholic and 'on the game'. He adds that she 'stinks' as she often wets herself. 'But you still get these young lads taking her up that alley and doing it with her,' he says in disgust. Later I discover Sheila's tragic past. Her baby was murdered by her pimp. Battered to death, for which he was sentenced to life imprisonment.

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