



# INVISIBLE WOMEN

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POWERFUL AND  
DISTURBING STORIES  
OF MURDERED  
SEX WORKERS

KYLIE FOX AND RUTH WYKES

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RUTH WYKES



When news of a murdered woman hits the headlines in Australia, people sit up and take notice. Unless that woman happens to be a sex worker. *Invisible Women* tells the stories of 65 murdered sex workers – all of whom are somebody’s mother, daughter, wife or sister – whose identities have been erased. Why do we see some lives as less valuable than others, and what price do we all pay for this disgraceful lack of care? These stories of incredible women are both deeply moving and shocking in their insight and clarity. And definitely way overdue.

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*For the forgotten, fallen women whose  
lives mattered more than they knew.*



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# INTRODUCTION

One woman dies while walking home at night and her murder sparks a national outpouring of grief, and a manhunt on a scale that is rarely seen in this country. Another woman is murdered at work, by a client, and barely a ripple is raised. Why is one murder deemed a national tragedy, and the other doesn't seem to matter at all?

It's a familiar story. A small article appears in the paper about a murder and it piques our interest for a moment. As we read on, and the circumstances reveal themselves, we realise it was just a sex worker and we look away. *Serves her right for putting herself in danger*, we think. *She asked for it. We don't care.*

What if that same story was about your sister or your best friend and her job wasn't mentioned? What if the media told you that a young mother went to work in an office, and that afternoon her boss told her to go outside and wash his car. She said no. He got angry and punched her in the face. These might seem like absurd comparisons. But are they? A woman who engages in sex work is just doing her job. If she consents to give a particular service to a client, it doesn't give them the right to brutalise her or take her life.

When we began to research this book, the lack of information

about murdered sex workers almost overwhelmed us. It seems that the more labels that are attached to a woman, the less human she becomes to other people. So a street-based, drug-addicted, homeless sex worker could disappear and it appears that nobody pays much attention.

The premise of this book is not to paint sex work in any light other than what it is. It is work. It is the transaction of some form of sexual service in exchange for money. But the women we have written about are among the most vulnerable in society. Most of the cases involve street-based sex workers. On a daily or weekly basis they go to work in a job that doesn't afford them the same protection the rest of us take for granted. There are few rules, no job description, no sick leave, no holiday pay, no minimum wage ... and very little protection.

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Sex work has been present in Australia at least since European settlement. Whether it's brothels, escorts or so-called red light districts, these services have existed for two basic reasons: they offer clients a vehicle for safe, relatively anonymous sex, and also sometimes a way to experience things their partners are unwilling to engage in.

Women who work in the sex industry do so for one basic reason: to earn money. It is important to acknowledge that for many Australian women in the commercial sex industry it is a conscious choice they are happy to make, and they work in the business to help them achieve other life goals – to put themselves through university, to pay off a mortgage more quickly, or because the money is great and the friends they make give them a real sense of community.

For some Australian women it is much more complex. The

road to St Kilda (Melbourne), and to other streets throughout the country that have become the workplaces of street-based sex workers, isn't straight. Neither is it a road many women know they are travelling until they arrive there.

This is a road for women who may have fallen through the cracks of our society. Women who, as children, found themselves in the confusing world of foster care; a world where, far too often, paedophiles are circling, ready to groom, persuade and abuse those least equipped to tell, or to fight back.

Women who don't remember the first time they were sexually assaulted. They were too young. And it happened so often, accompanied by words of love – or threats of punishment and pain. Those women know sex means nothing now; it's a tool, a weapon, a way to get what they need to survive.

Other women who were so young when they fell in love. They made excuses the first time their partner hit them, when he controlled their money, when he isolated them from their friends, from their family.

Women who, as children, lost a parent, a sibling, a friend and who stayed too quiet, bottling up their sadness until one day they were introduced to a drug that – for the first time in their young lives – took their pain away. Rebellious teenagers who, in an act of youthful defiance, said yes to a friend who offered them speed ... it felt incredible.

Women with no money, no networks of family or friends, very poor job prospects – for whom the taste of an opiate would take away their pain, or the buzz of amphetamine would make them feel amazing for a while.

Sometimes it is about mental illness and the scarcity of support. The need for survival may lead women to this place. Mental health services in Australia are under-resourced, and completely inadequate to meet the needs of our burgeoning

population. The trend towards de-stigmatising mental health has led to an enormous increase in homelessness. They are among the most vulnerable people in Australian society – and the most ignored.

It is these women: the homeless, mentally ill, abused, assaulted, drug-dependent members of society who are most at risk of having to become street-based sex workers. They are the women society has discarded, de-funded, disowned. It beggars belief that when they are injured or killed, people proclaim that it is their own fault, that they put themselves at risk.

When people think about street-based sex workers, they have preconceived ideas. Media reporting and pop culture haven't helped because they reinforce the stereotype of a desperate junkie, someone who hasn't found a way to fit in with our society, who leads a high-risk lifestyle. Someone they simply don't understand.

In reality no little girl, while she is growing up and finding her way in the world, harbours a dream to stand on a street corner in the middle of a freezing cold night and exchange sex with strangers for money. No little girl imagines that sex will be the one skill she will have to exchange for her survival as an adult.

The average age of starting out as a street-based sex worker is 13 – barely even a teenager. Thirteen. It doesn't matter whether people want to keep their heads in the sand or not; the truth is that there are paedophiles in Australia, they're organised and they're active. When children who have endured their abuse grow too old for them, they are discarded. Already damaged, distrustful of authority, believing there is no place in society where they fit, they look for ways to survive. They often find those ways on the streets among people who will accept them, support them and not judge them.

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In Australia, the majority of sex workers choose to work as escorts or in brothels, rather than as street workers. However, there are pockets in every major city that are known places for kerb crawlers to go in search of quick, anonymous sex. Currently it is estimated that between 1 and 2 per cent of sex workers are street-based.<sup>1</sup> This is in contrast to the rest of the world where more than 80 per cent of sexual services are transacted from the streets.

Of course the risks are greater. The very nature of the work requires these women to get into cars with strangers, or to go into dark alleys and engage in some form of sex. Once they are alone with a customer they are at his mercy, and it is not uncommon for the customer to take more than he has paid for. Although it is difficult to find accurate figures, some studies have shown that 80 per cent of street-based sex workers have experienced some form of violence in the last six months of working.<sup>2</sup> This violence can take many forms: refusal to use a condom, slapping, beating, assaulting, raping, abducting, stealing money and refusing to pay. Sometimes the violence leaves a woman so badly injured she is unable to work for days or weeks. Women are abducted for days at a time and held as sex slaves before being released.

Crimes against sex workers are rarely reported. A major reason for this is the legal status of their job. Depending on what kind of sex work they engage in, or where they operate from, they are often working outside the law. The law varies in the different states of Australia, but street-based sex work is not legal anywhere. When sex workers are raped or beaten they are often too afraid of the consequences of reporting the crime, and of being on the radar of the local police, to do anything about it. Another reason for the reluctance to report is that workers do not believe police will take them seriously. There are numerous historical cases where police have treated sex workers as more criminal than victim.

Street-based sex workers accept these increased risks, or simply feel there is no alternative. It would be simplistic to think we can understand the reasons, but for those who are out there it is preferable to working in brothels because the hours are more flexible, the pay is better and they get to be their own boss.

Another factor is that the majority of street-based sex workers are addicted to illicit drugs. Sex work is a quick, easy way to make the money they need to feed their addictions. It's a moot point: did they turn to the streets because they needed to fund a heroin addiction, or were they on the streets for other reasons, and began to take heroin as a coping tool? There is no clear cut answer, but it is generally accepted that almost all street-based sex workers are addicted to drugs. Addiction is a terrible disease that is given neither the respect nor the compassion by law makers and enforcers that it needs.

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It's not possible to ignore the feeling, the sense, that among the faceless men are the lonely, the ones who are scanning for a quick exchange of sex for cash, the curious, the judgemental, the overstimulated clans of teenagers. And the predators. There are men who are opportunistic; men who see themselves as ordinary, yet when they are with a sex worker, somehow they see themselves as entitled. She is offering a service for payment, but he decides he's paid for her and can use her in any way he sees fit. The other type of predator, thankfully more rare, is habitual, sadistic, and totally without remorse.

You can't tell by looking if a man is a hunter. More often than not he masquerades as normal; he makes sure you can't see him because he has planned the hunt, prepared for it. He has

fantasised about it for so long that it is truth in his head, long before it turns into behaviour.

It may surprise people to know that a predator doesn't pick up sex workers because they're prostitutes. While it's true they are more likely to be a target for violence than other women, it's not because they're sex workers ... it's because they're there.<sup>3</sup> They are accessible, and they are perceived to be less likely to have someone to go home to at the end of the day – they may not be missed as quickly as a woman who might be abducted in a shopping centre car park.

To the collective conscience it began with Jack the Ripper in London. To this day the images remain strong: a mystery man materialised from the fog in Whitechapel, restrained and sadistically murdered a woman, then simply vanished ... until the next time. Even though these murders took place almost 130 years ago, people remain fascinated with 'Jack'. Can those same people recall the name of even one of his victims?

Street-based sex workers remain an obvious target for some predators. American serial killer Gary Ridgeway was the Green River Killer who, during the 1980s and 1990s, murdered at least 49 women and girls in Washington State. Most of his victims were sex workers or women in vulnerable situations, including underage runaways. When DNA caught up with him he confessed to double that number. When asked why he chose sex workers as his victims, his answer was illuminating: 'I picked prostitutes as victims because they were easy to pick up without being noticed. I knew they would not be reported missing right away and might never be reported missing. I picked prostitutes because I thought I could kill as many of them as I wanted without getting caught.'<sup>4</sup>

Australia has its share of predators who have targeted sex workers. Men like Donald Morey who is languishing in a Western Australian prison. He was convicted in 2005 for the attempted

murder of a sex worker in Perth, and is the prime suspect in the murder of another sex worker and in the disappearance of a woman who had no connection to the sex industry. Bandali Debs, better known to the Australian public for murdering two police officers in 1998, also killed two young sex workers a couple of years before. Gregory Brazel is often described as one of Australia's most violent prisoners. He is perhaps best known for stabbing Chopper Read, but Brazel murdered two sex workers in 1990 and the female owner of a hardware store earlier in 1982. Former paramedic, Francis Fahey, wore his ambulance-issue boots when he murdered two sex workers in Queensland in 2002 and 2003.

As previously discussed, violent crime against sex workers is not uncommon. Many of the perpetrators may see women as less than human – particularly if they are women who sell sex to survive. Sometimes these crimes against women are impetuous, and with the increasing scourge of methamphetamines in society, behaviours are becoming even more aggressive and less predictable. However, there are many times where the assault is fantasised about, thoroughly planned, and then acted out. There might not be a better example of this than Adrian Ernest Bayley, the man who became the target of a manhunt when he raped and murdered Jill Meagher in 2012, while on parole for previous violent assaults against women.

It is impossible to know the extent of Bayley's crimes in the early 2000s when he trawled St Kilda in search of victims. It is a matter of public record that when he was caught at that time, he was charged with having raped and brutalised five sex workers, yet there were at least 10 other women who were assaulted, held against their will and raped by Bayley, but who refused to press charges or even report him to the police.

Adrian Bayley had perfected a trap that made it impossible

for his victim to escape until he had taken everything he wanted. He would pick up his victim, after negotiating a service with her, and then drive into a nearby laneway in Elwood. He would park his car so close to a wall that it was impossible for the woman to open the door and escape.

Court judge Anthony Duckett was horrified by Bayley's crimes and told him, 'Your response to pleading, cries of pain and tears was to force these women into further sex acts.'<sup>5</sup> Despite his revulsion at Bayley's behaviour, the judge handed down a relatively light sentence. Bayley served only eight years in prison. Even Tom Meagher, the husband of Bayley's murder victim, Jill, later said that Bayley had exposed an inequity in how the justice system treated those attacks.

Bayley only came to the national consciousness when he attacked a different kind of woman. Jill Meagher was just as accessible to Bayley as any of the sex workers from his earlier attacks. Jill could have been anyone but she just happened to be there. The difference this time, the reason the sex workers were horrifically attacked but survived and Jill was murdered, was that this time Bayley knew he had picked the 'wrong kind' of victim. Jill would report her attack. Jill would believe police would track her rapist down. Bayley wasn't going to stand for that. He was determined to remain free so he could continue his predatory and sadistic attacks on women.

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Violent crimes against sex workers are less frequently experienced in legal brothels, although they still happen from time to time. Brothels have rules, accountability, people on the premises and varying levels of security. This begs the question: if street work is so much more dangerous than working in a brothel, why don't

the women get safer jobs? The answer is multilayered, but the easiest way to understand it is to realise that brothels keep up to 60 per cent of the takings, and they have rules that some street-based workers would find impossible to adhere to. Rules such as no drugs while working, no drug addicts, working to a roster, monthly health checks, but mostly a lot less money for doing the same thing they do on the street.

The question also presumes that all sex workers are equal, and have the same needs and aspirations as each other. It assumes that brothel owners/managers don't share the mainstream community's contempt or pity for their street-based sisters. The reality is that brothels have a fairly low opinion of street-based workers and will not employ them. Words like 'dirty junkies', 'unreliable', 'thieves' all came from the mouth of one madam who didn't hold back when explaining her disinterest in employing street-based workers.

There is a hierarchy in the sex industry. At the top are the high-class escorts who command hundreds of dollars an hour. And the bottom? Those people who have the least resources, who are most at risk, or as one hysterical journalist described them when writing about murdered street-based sex workers from Queensland's Fortitude Valley, 'the bottom feeders of the Queensland sex industry'.<sup>6</sup>

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The Asian sex trade is an issue that nobody wants to talk about. Or if they do, they whisper about sex slaves, human trafficking, underworld crime or women who come to Australia to undercut the locals: better prices, more options, higher-risk sex.

It's difficult to separate the truth from the various myths that exist. Many Asian women work out of illegal brothels and

escort agencies, language barriers are real and cultural differences play a part.

Does human trafficking happen in Australia? Absolutely. There are documented cases of women from countries such as China, Thailand and Malaysia being recruited. Typically they and their families are in poverty and would be lucky to earn the equivalent of \$100 a month back home. The promises sound enticing. Go to Australia and go to school, or work in a karaoke bar. You'll make lots of money; you'll be able to support your family. We will pay your airfare and accommodation and you can pay us back out of your wages. There'll be plenty of money left for you to send your family, and to be able to spend yourself.

It's enticing. Of course the reality for some women is very different. Once they're through Australian immigration with their sponsor they are whisked off to a small, cramped, overcrowded apartment where the truth of their situation is explained to them. Coercion, violence and drugs are often used to enforce their new reality. They will service men, and they will like it – or they won't get paid. Rarely do these women ever pay off their loans. Creative bookkeeping ensures that they will continue to owe their sponsor money, long after they have repaid their 'debt'.

There are many other Asian women who come to Australia with their new western husband. It all goes well until it doesn't, and when the marriage ends, a number of women find themselves adrift in a strange land. They are often unskilled, have poor English, and work is hard to come by. They often end up engaged in sex work for survival.

Many other women make conscious choices to come to Australia to engage in sex work. Immigration law makes it almost impossible for single Asian women to come to Australia, so they find sponsors in their home country. They come here to make money, to be able to support their families back home.

For every legal brothel in Melbourne there are four illegal ones. Often working from shopfronts that offer therapeutic massage, or from temporary dwellings that are easy to shut down, they have sprung up all over Australia. And they appeal to their customers. They offer services at cheaper rates than the legal brothels and escort services, and are sometimes willing to engage in riskier behaviours.

Because illegal brothels operate outside the law, they are not compelled to honour any of the safe work practices that are rigorously applied to their legal counterparts. Distress buttons, security, regular health checks and the mandatory use of condoms may or may not be adopted.

Very few people know the real names of the workers, or anything about them, so how would anyone know if they go missing? The truth is that unless someone discovers a body, nobody does know. When Chinese escort Ting Fang was murdered in Adelaide on New Year's Day 2015, it took days to formally identify her and notify her relatives in China. When the badly decomposing bodies of 'Jenny' and 'Susan' were discovered in a bedroom in a Sydney apartment in 2008, nobody knew them or anything about their murders. This was despite the fact that the women had died horrifically in an apartment they shared with 11 other people. In 2000, a woman known as 'Bambi' was shot in an illegal brothel in Queensland and her 12-year-old daughter was abducted and raped. Yet nobody seemed to know anything about it.

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The Australian justice system has come under well-deserved fire in recent years for weighing up the relative value of victims, and imposing lighter sentences when the victim has been perceived

to be 'high risk'. The murder of Grace Iardi highlighted this. Grace was 39 years old when she was murdered in Elwood in 2004. Her killer fled not only the scene but the country. He eventually came back to face justice. Quincy Detenamo was an Olympic weightlifter from the small Pacific nation of Nauru. He said he was sorry, he didn't mean to kill her ... things just got out of hand. Newspapers denounced Grace as 'just a prostitute' and described Detenamo as a 'fallen hero'. The weight given to one life over another was too great. He was acquitted of murder and found guilty of manslaughter. Detenamo was sentenced to serve less than 10 years in prison.

Police have often been guilty of not treating crimes against sex workers as seriously as they should. Perhaps an insight into their attitudes is a cartoon that used to hang on a wall in an interview room in one Australian police station. It depicted a sex worker who was up before a judge who said, 'How do you know it was rape?' to which she replied, 'Because the cheque bounced.'

The sign has been removed, along with some of the preconceived ideas that police have had about sex workers. Although attitudes among police have shifted in the last decade, women are still reluctant to report. They are also wary of having a profile with police as they are fully aware that both their sex work and drug use are viewed as criminal behaviour.

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When the bodies of two women were found floating in the Adelaide River, a muddy crocodile-infested river just south of Darwin, Northern Territory police braced themselves for the media onslaught.

This was going to be a pressure cooker. It had all the ingredients of a case that would bring the national media spotlight

to the Territory: sex, drugs, bodies thrown to the crocs, a double murder, teenage suspects and interstate pursuit. And this was one part of Australia where the police force understood how intensely the press would scrutinise their every move. Experience had taught them this years ago when a couple claimed that a dingo had taken their baby from their campsite at Uluru.

Nothing happened. Once it became apparent that the victims were *only* prostitutes – and foreign ones at that – the media seemed to make a collective judgement that this wasn't a story worthy of the nation's attention. Besides, both the media and the public remained preoccupied with another Territory case that had happened almost three years previously – the disappearance of British backpacker Peter Falconio, somewhere in the outback.

Why did the media feed the Australian public an almost daily diet of the mysterious disappearance of a young tourist and pursue his girlfriend, Joanne Lees, halfway around the world yet practically ignore the murder of two women and the callous way their bodies were disposed of?

It is a question which, in one form or another, raised its ugly head numerous times during the research for this book. It became such a predictable, recurring theme – lack of media interest, lack of public information. To the media, the murder of most of these women seemed worthy of little more than a salacious headline: 'Sports Star Kills Prostitute', 'Sex Worker Dies in Hotel'.

Why is it that the public care about the death of some women and not others? In Perth between 1996 and 1997 there was a cluster of disappearances and murders thought to have been committed by the Claremont Serial Killer. Three young women disappeared, and two of them were later found murdered. The prevailing view amongst women all over Perth at the time was, 'It could have been me.' Women responded with gut-clenching fear, and changed their own behaviour – and sometimes their

appearance – to avoid drawing the attention of a monster. It was the most talked about crime in Perth for decades. The victims were middle-class and respectable and they all disappeared while enjoying a night out with friends. The city was horrified, terrified – and the public pressure to track down the Claremont Serial Killer was unprecedented. While the cases remain unsolved, they are still talked about with emotion and anxiety in Western Australia.

In 1998, Lisa Brown disappeared from the streets of Perth. In 1999, Jennifer Wilby vanished. Then in 2003, Darylyn Ugle was murdered. All three women were sex workers. When Lisa disappeared, some people worried that the Claremont Killer had changed his modus operandi, because Jennifer Wilby died soon after. Police rushed to reassure the public that this was different, and there was nothing to be alarmed about. Then Darylyn Ugle was murdered, but police and media reinforced their message to the public: there was no link. Many people took the view that Lisa was a drug-addicted prostitute who put herself at risk. Sympathy for her plight and the deaths of Jennifer and Darylyn was difficult to find.

This kind of victim-blaming is misleading and naive.

In September 2012, a beautiful young woman disappeared from Brunswick: Jill Meagher. For a week, Melburnians were fixated on the story. When an arrest was made and her body subsequently discovered, the details of the crime horrified people. The depth of public feeling could be measured in the march to honour Jill Meagher that attracted more than 30 000 people.

In July 2013, the papers ran a story that a sex worker had been murdered in her van in St Kilda. Her name was Tracy Connelly but it took the media almost a week to reveal that. Tracy was part of the St Kilda landscape; she had been on the scene for a long time and was loved by many people. She was

addicted to heroin, and so was her partner, Tony. He would sit and spot for her, carefully copying down registration numbers of vehicles Tracy left in. She was a hard worker, and supportive and caring to other sex workers. It was on the one night that she and Tony were separated, while he was in hospital, that Tracy was brutally killed.

Despite the fact that both women lost their lives in circumstances that were horrific, and two sets of families and friends were shattered, the general community embraced Jill as if she were one of their own, yet treated Tracy's murder with collective indifference. Was it because ordinary people could relate to Jill, and the circumstances of her murder suggested it could have happened to any of us? CCTV footage was released to the public in both cases. Police were overwhelmed by information they received about the man seen talking to Jill. No viable suspects resulted from the CCTV images near the scene of Tracy's murder. Was it that people genuinely didn't care, or did they believe that a woman they perceived as leading a high-risk lifestyle had brought something like this upon herself? Jill's killer is in prison, while Tracy's remains free.

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*Invisible Women* is by no means a definitive book on the different cases of missing and murdered sex workers in Australia. When we began to research the stories we were astounded. It was always our intention to highlight these crimes against women – the ones nobody seemed to want to talk about. We wanted to contribute to the discussion about why some women's lives seem more valuable, in the eyes of the community, than others; why some murders touch us deeply, and leave us feeling diminished, while others don't even register. When we began to research this book

we had no idea how difficult it would be to find people willing to talk, or information about the victims of these crimes. There are paper mountains of information about the perpetrators of the crimes, but almost nothing about the victims.

Is the media to blame? Is it their fault that they only give weight to murder when it has an ‘angle’ that might affect all of us, or when the victim seems especially innocent or the killer likely to strike again? Or do the media merely reflect back to us the society that we have demanded and shaped for ourselves?

Is it TV or the movies that, for years, have created stereotypes and shaped our thinking and learning? Do we really only have sympathy for a sex worker when she is Julia Roberts in *Pretty Woman*, and to our vast relief she is rescued from that life by her knight in shining armour? Do we really believe the other side of the media portrayal of sex workers as dirty, risky, naughty women?

Is it the justice system that historically gives criminals lighter sentences when they have *only* raped a prostitute? Is it religion that – across all faiths – reinforces that sex workers are moral outcasts to be condemned or cured?

Or is it us? Do our own personal values and attitudes prevent us from seeing that different isn’t necessarily wrong? Who taught us to think that sex workers are second-class citizens? And why did we choose to believe them? Religion has long influenced people in their views about sex workers. Governments throughout the history of Australia have legislated against sex work. The justice system has punished it, and society has mocked and derided it. Misogyny plays a strong part in the bias against sex workers. Although our country has come a long way in terms of the status of women in Australian society, there still exist strong double standards about the role of women in this country. If a ‘nice girl’ is still judged by the number of sexual partners she has had, a sex

worker carries the weight of condemnation even more heavily on her shoulders.

It took us a long time, and some robust discussion, to decide on who we would highlight in this book. Every woman's story is worth telling, and our eventual decisions were no reflection on the value of the women we haven't been able to include in *Invisible Women*. It was our hope to bring these women to life in a way that might show readers who they really were beyond the headlines: mothers, sisters, daughters, friends, colleagues. Women who loved animals and children, who did the crossword in the newspaper, played Trivial Pursuit and laughed with unbridled joy.

That task was naive, and in many cases insurmountable. For every woman in Australia who has been murdered, they have left behind a network of family and friends whose lives have been shattered by their loss. Yet these living victims of crime don't have access to the same levels of support as people whose loved ones were more 'innocent' victims.

The system needs to change. The cracks in the road need to be paved over. It isn't the sex work or the drug use that creates the dangerous cracks, but the reasons these women are forced to walk that road in the first place.

Change requires compassionate and visionary government across all states and territories of Australia; change that understands there is a place for sex workers in contemporary society, and that legislation needs to be passed to decriminalise sex work.

It requires an honest appraisal of the reasons why women find themselves standing on the street at 3 a.m. – the poverty, homelessness, addiction, mental health issues, domestic violence and criminality that keep street-based sex workers enslaved to a lifestyle they don't want, but can't find a way out of.

It requires the funding of outreach programs and safe houses to help deal with the complex, and incredibly difficult task of helping to affect change in the lives of street-based sex workers.

And it requires us, as ordinary people, to stop victim-blaming when we read that another sex worker has been harmed or killed. And to not look away.

*Alongside the higher-profile cases featured in this book the authors have included a series of shorter pieces about whom little is known – these are the real invisible women of the title.*

*The stories are presented in chronological order, with one obvious exception. The death of Tracy Connelly, and Wendy Squires' subsequent blog post, was the catalyst behind the writing of this book. It seems only fitting the book starts here.*

**Her Name Was Tracy**

## **TRACY CONNELLY**

21 July 2013

Tracy Connelly's last actions on earth were typical of the caring and compassionate woman that friends and work colleagues loved. Her partner, Tony Melissovas, the man Tracy had loved and shared her life with for nine years, had a severely infected hand. True to form, he refused to go to hospital, even when it had swollen to almost the size of a football, preferring to stay with Tracy and look after her. Tracy, however, was having none of that. She called an ambulance and when the paramedics arrived, convinced Tony to go with them.

Tracy spent the afternoon with Tony in the hospital, lying on his bed and chatting cheerily to keep his mind off the pain in his hand. That night Tracy had to leave to go to work. Tony had serious misgivings though. Usually while Tracy worked, he would loiter quietly in the background keeping an eye out for her and writing down the number plates of each car she drove away in. In recent years he had accumulated more than 3000 registration numbers.

Like most street-based sex workers, Tracy had her own patch of St Kilda where she worked – a place everyone knew as Tracy's Corner. She kissed Tony goodnight and headed back

to the Econovan in Greeves Street. No doubt she would have preferred to snuggle under the doona – it was cold outside – but they needed money. She emerged from the van dressed for work – no longer Tracy, she was in her working persona of ‘Kelly’ – and walked off into the long night.

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Tony was restless and anxious at the hospital. He hated not being around to protect Tracy. His concerns were abated a little when he received a text from her at around 10.30 p.m. to let him know she was safe and well.

Melbourne was in the midst of a bitterly cold winter and working the streets was hard slog; one can imagine that a paying customer would be a welcome relief from the cold outside. Perhaps Tracy let her guard down a little.

As the night wore on, Tony’s anxiety rose. Hours had passed and he hadn’t heard again from Tracy, though she’d promised to check in with him throughout the night.

Sunday morning, 21 July 2013, dawned and Tony still hadn’t heard from Tracy. Meanwhile, the people of St Kilda went about their business, strolling down Greeves Street towards busier roads, visiting cafes for breakfast, heading to The Esplanade, Luna Park or the bay. Many walked or drove past the silent Ford Econovan, not giving its presence a second thought. The van, which had been home to Tracy and Tony for several months, was a sight locals were accustomed to, and visitors barely noticed it.

Tracy’s close friend was asleep in her own van across the road. Their proximity to each other gave them a sense of safety. They had organised the previous day to bunk in together on the Saturday night after work. But there had not been an ‘after work’ for Tracy, and in any case, her friend had fallen asleep.

Tony grew increasingly worried throughout the morning and, as the morning became afternoon, he could take Tracy's silence no longer. He discharged himself from the hospital and headed home to find her.

Greeves Street was quiet, save from the usual sounds of cars and people going about their business. Tony and a friend went straight to the van he and Tracy shared, hoping to find her fast asleep and apologetic for having worried him unnecessarily. As he slid open the van door, the silence was shattered. Tracy's battered body lay inside.

In a panic, Tony and his friend pulled Tracy out of the van and laid her on the ground, their instinct to revive her. They couldn't see her properly inside the van – it was dark, there was too much blood. Yet even before they managed to gently lay her on the ground, they knew in their hearts it was too late.

She was dead.

A neighbour saw Tony just moments later: 'We saw him after he discovered the body and he was hysterical, uncontrollably crying. I knew straight away something had happened. His face was just ... You could just tell he was broken.'

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Tracy Connelly came from a loving family. At 15, like a lot of girls that age, Tracy started acting out at home, craving her independence and desperately wanting to try new things and make her own decisions. Her father later reflected, 'I don't think she was totally rebellious, but certain friends had a lot more freedom than she did and then Tracy wanted to be with them of course.'<sup>7</sup>

She fell into the trappings of this newfound rebellious lifestyle, trying drugs, drinking and staying out well past curfew. One night, Tracy stayed out until three in the morning and this

made her mother furious. Tracy was grounded – no more going out until she could be trusted to return at a reasonable hour. Unhappy with that, Tracy called Child Welfare who talked to her mother and told her that Tracy was old enough to do as she liked. The response ‘not under my roof’ pushed Tracy’s hand and she was found accommodation two days later.

It was in that accommodation, a ‘halfway house for drug addicts who were trying to get off the drugs or whatever’ that she met a boy, Matthew who she quickly entered into a relationship with, and who then introduced her to hard drugs.<sup>8</sup>

Both Tracy and Matthew became addicted to heroin and then, to support their habit, began sex work. This was a course that was to shape the rest of Tracy’s life.

When Tracy had just turned 18, she went and saw her parents to tell them that she and Matthew were expecting a baby. Their initial reaction was one of shock and horror: ‘They can’t look after themselves! How are they going to look after a baby?’<sup>9</sup>

But their fears seemed to be misguided. For a while, it seemed the baby was the best thing that could have happened. Tracy gave birth to a healthy baby boy who they named Billy, and the couple seemed to be coping well. They doted on the baby, cleaned themselves up and Matthew went back to studying at university.

Then, for reasons still unclear, the couple separated and Matthew took baby Billy to Tasmania where his mother lived. Perhaps the lure of drugs and her previous lifestyle were too strong for Tracy and she thought her baby would be better off without her.

A friend of Matthew’s mother was looking after Billy. News filtered through to Tracy’s parents about their grandson’s whereabouts at around the same time they learned that Matthew had committed suicide. A battle for custody ensued and Billy was

eventually returned to Melbourne to live with Tracy's parents who raised him from then on.

Tracy saw Billy a few times but eventually she returned to her life of drugs and sex work and rarely spoke to her family. When Billy was around 10 years old, Tracy's family left Melbourne and settled into a new life on Queensland's Gold Coast. At around this time Tracy fell pregnant again. When the baby was born she gave him up for adoption. Over the years she drifted in and out of her nomadic lifestyle. And then she met Tony Melissovas.

The couple were happy together, moving in with Tony's mother and entering rehabilitation to get off heroin. Clean, Tracy even obtained employment in a cafe, working with Tony's mother. By all accounts she loved the work, she was happy and the job lasted for several years. Things were looking up.

Then, in 2009, Tony's mother died and the pair started a downward spiral. They both returned to using heroin and before long Tracy was back on the streets of St Kilda, working as Kelly, to pay for the drugs.

In late 2012 or early 2013, the Ford Econovan that Tracy and Tony called home broke down and they had it towed to Greeves Street outside the St Kilda Gatehouse, a refuge for street-based sex workers that Tracy frequented. There she felt safe and had a lot of friends. Everybody – other workers, clientele and the social workers who worked at the Gatehouse – thought highly of Tracy, describing her as friendly and cheerful and always willing to lend a helping hand. Her exotic good looks didn't go unnoticed either. Social worker Lucy Valentino remembered, 'I'd rock up to work and there's the van, and there'd be these big long legs coming out of the van and even though Tracy was technically homeless, she'd come out of that bloody van looking like a model.'

Tracy spoke to her friends about getting out of the life, often while baking cupcakes or having a cup of tea at the Gatehouse.

She truly disliked the life she was leading but couldn't see many alternatives. Nonetheless, she was a loved member of her community and many have noted that she never came across as a 'strung out druggie', a label that too easily stereotypes heroin users.

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When Tracy kissed her boyfriend goodnight and walked away from his hospital bed, neither of them had any clue that they would never see each other again. Tracy never took clients back to their van, preferring instead to go in the client's car to another location. In fact, Tony always held onto the keys, removing any temptation that his partner could be talked into using it. But Tony was in hospital that Saturday night, and Tracy had the keys to the van. Perhaps, without Tony there to watch out for her, without him diligently taking down the registration numbers of each punter, Tracy felt less threatened in the relative safety of her own home, in easy view of the Gatehouse and of her friend who slept in her own vehicle only 20 metres away. Perhaps the cold of that winter night made her desperate to get indoors for a while. Whatever the reason, Tracy found herself in a van with the man who would take her life.

When Tracy's body was found, battered and with extensive injuries to her head and upper body, her handbag, mobile phone and credit card were missing. Was this a robbery gone wrong? Had somebody, presumably a client, decided to rob the few things Tracy owned? Had she fought back, enraging him so that the crime escalated into this brutal murder? Or was murder the intention all along? Perhaps the missing possessions were simply an act of staging by the perpetrator.

Surprisingly, given the brutal nature of the attack, the media

remained silent for more than a day. Then came the headlines: 'Homicide police investigate prostitute's death in St Kilda', 'St Kilda prostitute brutally murdered'. The story was simple, its inference clear: a street-walking, heroin-addicted prostitute was dead. Everyone knew she must have led a high-risk life, and put herself in harm's way. This wasn't a crime that affected everybody, it was restricted. The public at large were safe. No newspaper space was wasted, no air time given on television. Tracy's death didn't matter.

But it did matter. It mattered to Tony Melissovas. It mattered to Tracy's family who had spent a lifetime afraid of that particular knock on the door, that horrifying phone call; a call, when it came, that led to Tracy's mother suffering a heart attack. It mattered to the other girls who worked near Tracy and considered her a friend. It mattered to the workers at St Kilda Gatehouse who looked forward to their regular cuppas and a chat with Tracy. And, fortunately, it mattered to a journalist who happened to see Tracy each day on her way to work.

When news of the death broke, *The Age* journalist Wendy Squires wrote a blog about a woman she passed each day, who she occasionally gave coffee to, who was always quick with a bright smile and a wave. Squires didn't know the identity of the murdered sex worker, what she did know was that her friend hadn't been on her usual corner for days. Squires appealed to the universe for the murdered woman not to be Tracy. She spent days trying to establish the identity of the victim. When her worst fears were confirmed, her blog post was quickly updated and 'Her name was Tracy Connelly and she was my friend', a heartfelt and equally heartbreaking story, went viral across social media platforms.

Just as people were starting to sit up and take notice, Tony Melissovas released a photo of himself and Tracy through social

media. It was an image taken a few years ago, of the happy couple snuggling in the snowfields. Almost overnight Tracy Connelly became human in the eyes of the public: her smile was warm, her face was open, hopeful, and her eyes were kind. Suddenly Tracy wasn't just some anonymous drug-addicted street worker; she became a real woman with hopes and dreams and a life.

A week after Tracy's murder, Melbourne radio station Joy FM ran a special tribute to Tracy during their weekly show *The Vixen Hour*. Friends of Tracy were asked to talk about her, and their memories made her real, well beyond the headlines that had struggled to even print her name:

I knew her as a lovely lady, as a friend; helpful to everybody, always sweet, always came in and gave you a kiss g'day and said, 'Hello darls' to everybody. She will be very, very missed. She was a delightful person, wonderful to have a discussion with. Very well spoken. Very articulate. She was lovely.

I've known Tracy for over 10 years. She was loved by pretty much everybody in St Kilda. She was incredibly warm, very intelligent, exceptionally beautiful – and exceptionally brown, in winter as well. And she was loved by all.

Tracy, to me, represents – I suppose she's an image of myself because she's worked ever since I've been here. Like, we used to share the same corner – we're talking nearly 20 years ago and she's been there. She's always been around. So just a huge shock and totally devastating.

I knew Tracy for four and a half years. We saw each other daily. I really connected with her around parenting 'cause she had

some boys and I've got a boy, and she was always interested in how my 12-year-old was doing and whether he was still being a nightmare. Always had really wise words to say, which was awesome. And also the thing about her is that she had the best posture. When I saw her I would always stand up straight. I will remember that forever. If I want a picture in my mind, it's her standing up really straight, looking fabulous – and being an amazing person that cared more about others than she did about herself.

My experience of Tracy as a friend towards me was Tracy saw me walking back to the Gatehouse late one afternoon. I was severely traumatised by some news from the doctor about myself. Her and her partner pulled over and made damn sure that I got to where I needed to go, which was back to the doctors. She would have stopped to help anybody that needed help; she was a very loving, very caring person, and I will miss her terribly.

She was just the most beautiful person. She would bounce into the Gatehouse, always happy. Never want to give you any of her pain. Never showed her pain. Always interested in what everyone else was doing, and – just lovely. Beautiful, beautiful person. Definitely a light's gone out at the Gatehouse now.

I was lucky and privileged and honoured to know the beautiful Tracy. Not only was she exotic and beautiful to look at, she was warm, friendly, and had one of the best senses of humour. I would often see her when I was down in St Kilda, working. She had her own special corner and we'd often have conversations around her special corner because I knew police would probably charge her with loitering. But she assured me

she had a lovely relationship with all the people around that particular corner.

I was a very close friend of Tracy's and she was a very beautiful person. She had a heart of gold and she'd do anything for anybody. I love Tracy, and everyone loves her – and that's the way she'll always be remembered.

I remember Tracy as a bit of a character, but a lovely, lovely girl who has been around for a long, long time. Special little things I remember about her was her lovely manners and beautiful posture. She would trot in here on her high heeled boots, and make us all laugh. And trot in and have a drink of cordial, and go back to work. And she had to work. She worked very, very hard.

She was hard to get to know but once you got under that hard exterior she was the sweetest person that you could ever find . . . and she made boobs out of nothing, and she inspired me. Now I do the same thing.

Tracy Connelly. She was very personable and very polite but she was also funny. Very dynamic in her way. Used to tell little stories about family and how her dad would renovate, then her mum wouldn't like it, then he'd do it the other way. Very dedicated renovator. And little stories about people and things, incidents that had happened.

Tracy was my friend, she's really special. I know that sounds a bit cliché but Tracy really did stand out for me because she gave of herself so much. She gave me more than I could ever have given to her. She was beautiful, she was deep, she will be deeply missed.

The media at large were forced to take notice and several articles were printed about the life of Tracy Connelly. A candlelight vigil, attended by the St Kilda community, Tracy's family and friends, as well as several well-known celebrities, was held to honour the life of Tracy and to bring emphasis to the often invisible and ignored side of Melbourne's nightlife.

What happened in those early morning hours of 21 July? Had someone been watching, someone who knew her routines, her habits? Someone who knew that for the first time in years her minder was not out on the streets this night?

Was it a crime of opportunity? A client who met Tracy and went back to her van with her for sex then saw a chance to rob her? Or was it someone with a more sadistic bent who stole her purse, phone and credit card to mask their real intentions?

Two separate weapons were used to batter the life out of Tracy. The injuries she sustained to her head and chest were horrific – more than were necessary to disable someone in order to steal then flee the scene, more than was 'necessary' to end her life.

Police released CCTV footage that showed Tracy at the corner of Mitchell and Carlisle Streets, St Kilda, at 11.30 p.m. on Saturday, 20 July 2013. Police said CCTV footage showed Tracy with at least one other person within 20 metres of her van between 1.30 a.m. and 2.30 a.m. on Sunday morning. Other CCTV footage of a man walking along the street wearing a jacket and white shoes was also released by police. It is possible that this man inadvertently witnessed something important to the case and police are very keen to speak to him. Yet more footage showed a dark-coloured late-model ute, the owner of which the police are especially keen to speak to.

A year earlier when police released CCTV footage of another wanted man to the public, they had been swamped with tips; the

blue-hoodie-clad man had been caught by the cameras of a bridal boutique in Brunswick, he had been talking to Jill Meagher, she was missing. He was identified to police within hours. Police were optimistic that they would have similar success with this CCTV footage, yet no meaningful leads have come from it.

The predator who took Tracy Connelly's life remains at large. Police believe it was a robbery gone wrong. They collected DNA and, although it doesn't match anyone in known databases, it may one day unlock the mystery.

Tracy's friends still talk about her as if she hasn't quite left the building. They relate stories of her life with great affection and sadness. They laugh when they recall stories of her mischief, like the cupcake-making afternoon at St Kilda Gatehouse where, vanilla essence in hand, Tracy added a few drops to the mix then skulled the rest of the bottle. Or of the time she managed to find that one hidden bottle of champagne. They miss that moment where she would burst into the drop-in centre, with a beaming smile on her face and a 'Hello, darls.'

Those closest to Tracy remember her genuine love for Tony. It's common on the streets to have a 'partner', but often it's a relationship of convenience, of mutual need. Tracy and Tony, they say, had a strong connection: solid, tight and genuine. Real love. Tony, according to people who knew him, was broken and guilt-ridden when Tracy was murdered.

In some ways it is amongst her peers that she has left the most yawning of chasms. In any workplace people need mentors, people who have been in the job for a while, who can teach them the ropes, the shortcuts, the tips to keep them safe. Tracy's reputation on the streets was of a careful woman, who was aware of the risks, and who did as much as she could to minimise them. She was known to be a great support to younger workers. Someone who looked out for you. Someone who cared.

In quiet, reflective moments she would say she hated the life. Hated it. She wanted to find a way out. She would talk to people about Billy, about Tony, about what might have been, and what could still be possible.

Tracy Connelly would be surprised if she knew what had happened since her death. She had been in the game for many years, and knew the public's perceptions about her lifestyle. It was a lifestyle she had grown to despise, that she dreamed of escaping. It left her feeling like she wasn't worth very much.

She couldn't have been more wrong.