

# IDEAS

*'Pagers and glass pipes and lies and rip-offs and "Who has good stuff?" are the usual bits of conversation in the Kensington Market junkie world'*



JONATHAN KAY / NATIONAL POST

## KENSINGTON'S LOST LIVES

TIMBER MASTERSON  
in Toronto

**N**ow, the winter, that's different. Not so good." These words are from Val, a girl I've known for years, who is no longer the girl I once knew, banging around the market, feet in the park's kiddie pool, on the Greek's patio having a beer with friends, singing, sitting at the outdoor café, when someone always had a guitar. It's getting too cold for frivolity now; found funds go elsewhere; that guitar got pawned. Musical instruments are one of the first things to go when you're down to essentials.

The Kensington Market area of Toronto is a patchwork: of nationalities, of lives, of extremes. Some days there's an atmosphere of a last stop before you head off and out to unexpected worlds. All sorts from suburbia and the uptown-downtown come here to play, shop, drink espresso, talk loudly and buy fresh fruit.

It is entirely different for Val and her "family," the people she's adopted into her heroin- and crack-addicted fold. It's nightmarish, distressing and nerve-racking; a spinning chamber in a game with a gun. Her world doesn't show up on any standard radar.

But if you stick around when the day starts to wind down, take notice in a way you normally don't, it'll open up to you and reveal a very unpretty underworld. You find it layered behind the second- (or third-) hand clothes stores, the fruit markets, the Casa Acoreana bulk food and candy store, and funky cafés that close up once the sun disappears and it's the end of normalcy, when those who have somewhere else to go, make their way home.

"We used to use just sometimes, now and then, it wasn't a big deal. I was busy with school, keeping up with courses. I remember we just used to sniff a little and then go lose ourselves in classes."

"School" was the University of Toronto. Val was once a promising student, projects on the go, busy with life. "I just got to like it too much, I don't know how things changed."

Val is one of many I meet down here; she has as much of an answer as anybody as to how they all ended up on the street, taken there by

drugs. They all tell stories of people dying in their lives, before it's time, and of just too much bad luck.

The storefronts that shut at the end of the day are like the friends and relatives in their lives who've said, "No, I don't know how to be in your life when you live like you do. You've made your choice."

There's K-Rock. He's black, 42, and has lived in Cuba and South America, has had two wives and millions of dollars, pesos and francs. He sells cocaine here every day and when his day is done, he returns to his apartment up in the Annex. He's saving up money to go to Colombia, to get things "set up again."

There's Little Lou, 30, Chinese. He's ended up here because he used to be a gambling man. Making runs to the casino, loansharking large amounts, was married once, now has run through all that, the money and the people, that life. Lately he's been selling \$20 packages of heroin and spending what he makes on crack. He spends a lot of time smoking crack, finding the alleyways. Lou has no real home, but tells me he has "lots of places to stay." He gets his drugs from that Jamaican lady or the Asian kids who skulk around the public housing project, the hopeless brown boxes that pass for a place to live, handily just a hop over the streetcar tracks. Often some black kids gather in packs, huddled together on the steps selling drugs, pretty openly. You wonder why this is apparently "allowed" to go on here.

Then there's the guy who I've never seen off his bike, always a hat, always with the Grizzly Adams beard; he runs dope around the market.

There are the ones who beg for change. A couple hours' work can be a windfall of 20 bucks, enough to call K-Rock, who's sure to be just blocks away when the humans wake. "It's like clockwork," he says.

The market is quieter in winter, less colourful, less pretty, bleak unless the sun is out, or during the brief bubble of the Winter Solstice parade. It's stark then: the outlines of bodies wrapped in sheets, bodies sleeping it off, until they awake with bone-throbbing withdrawal, the sweats, the sh-ts, the need. And all that living in denial must get tiring. Damn tiring.

I ask Val to show me what's in her

bag. A pill bottle, condoms, syringes, Kleenexes, nuts (for when she gets hungry), a lighter, smokes, crumpled bits of paper with important phone numbers. "Hah, that's funny, my old student card. I just use it for ID and stuff now."

The Jamaican lady has been selling crack (rock or "food" as the users call it), in that absurd little fake record store for at least 10 years. "Food," because this drug is what sustains these lives, the way regular meals and a roof over our heads are for the rest of us. "Mama" also sells everything white kids from the suburbs need to Jamaicanize themselves: Rasta caps, Bob Marley music, incense.

I offer to buy Mish — 42 and worn thin — some lunch if she'll talk to me

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today. She moved here from across town at a young age. She went from acid and weed to shooting cocaine.

"I was just drawn here. The market's really laid-back. I can walk through the market, and I find it safe here. I'm not saying I've done good in the market, all the time I've been here. I ran around for 10 years straight on the needle, banging cocaine, raped by bad tricks, being in situations I'd never want to see anybody go through, I found people dead in hotels, my girlfriend was murdered, all kinds of things. I've paid my dues for the wrongs I've done."

"You don't have to worry about not waking up in the morning, like at Allan Gardens or Regent Park. I still feel accepted here. I feel like a person here."

Is this Toronto's Downtown East-side Vancouver? Is it a fringe community left to feed upon itself and dis-

solve before there's a chance to do something? But what?

A downtown methadone clinic doctor tells me that patients who have trouble with drugs, and often have multiple disorders, find it very tough to get the help they need, or in some cases, the right medication.

"I've referred many to the Centre for Addiction & Mental Health. I can only describe the experience they have as a kind of Ping-Pong game. Patients begin a gruelling process of application requiring many forms and lots of waiting before acceptance. The addiction centre says one thing, and if they're moved over to see the mental health section, the process of application begins again and they're given very different information about their problems and what to do about it. Patients often end up giving up, because it's just such a demoralizing and frustrating experience."

People rarely get the help they need. A psychologist with experience in addiction says that since deinstitutionalization, it's next to impossible to receive long-term treatment for psychiatric patients or addiction-related concerns.

"The treatment approach now is medication and the principle is rapid reintegration into the community. While this works for some, the lack of community supports for patients with more serious disorders and more extensive needs ensures failure at reintegration and results in a revolving-door experience since the determining entrance-and-exit issue is the measurement of risk of harm to self or others."

"So, you don't sleep indoors?" I ask Terry, a girl who lets me talk and walk with her, provided I keep pace as she makes her way quickly around the bicycles and garbage and people relaxing on the sidewalks.

Terry has places to go. She's just made a call. "C'mon, man, he's not going to wait all day."

"I don't need to pay all that f--kin' rent. Last time the super tossed my stuff out into a dumpster. I sleep around," she tells me and laughs, "Hey, that's not really what I mean, but that happens, too." Her laugh is embarrassed or bravado or both. She has just the one tooth in the front, Phyllis Diller hair and smeared makeup, but you can see how she might have been pretty. Once.

What has she witnessed? How much can you witness before you become a Terry: walking around, well, more circling around, with that dead look, slouched on cement steps?

Pagers and cellphones and glass pipes and syringes and "What can you do for me?" and lies and rip-offs and "Where do we go to score?" and "Where do we go now to use?" and "Who has good stuff?" are the usual bits of conversation in the Kensington Market junkie world. All underlaid by a tone of anxious urgency.

Some resort to a methadone program. Some deal to get by, to pay for the occasional meal to sustain body, if not soul. A lot of the time, it's just begging. "You tell yourself, it's not me, it's just what I have to do."

Just mention a hospital or treatment or institutions to any of these people and you get the reflex runaround: "They don't understand. They don't get it." Many of the addicts see or seek no solution. They exhibit no perspective beyond the immediacy of the need for the next fix. There's no turning back from this "life."

Is there? Mish and I order some food at The Moonbeam Café. "I have respect for others who come to visit the market. Some of these gals hold a pipe in their hands, around these little kids, who come down for the day on a field trip or something. I've been desperate, but I at least I make it to a public washroom and hide myself and do my drug, not sit right at the middle of the corner, or on the step in the middle of the afternoon, while people are walking by and going to buy their groceries or whatever. Like every day, there's a classroom here. I remember doing that, and years and years later they're still doing it."

The stall shutters rattle closed, and I wander away from Val and K-Rock and Lou, the open bargaining, laughing, trucks being unloaded, the racket, strange odours and mists rising from sewer gratings.

I think of what Mish said during our quiet time away from the racket and desperation. "As long as your soul doesn't get corrupted, you'll be all right."

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