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[My Experience as a Craigslist Hooker: A Requiem for Craigslist Erotic Services](#)

On Wed. May 13, Craigslist announced that it will shut down its erotic services section, marking the end of an era. With the negative publicity generated by the Craigslist Killer and a stampede of outraged attorney generals calling for its demise, Craigslist Erotic Services will be no more. This is a requiem. And a plea for a rational discourse about sex work.

I know it seems strange to eulogize what was basically an online red light district, but in my experience there was a brief moment when Craigslist Erotic Services transformed both the meaning and the means of being a sex worker. There one could open a virtual lemonade stand which operated according to self-imposed rules and regulations. Anonymity was almost guaranteed. Craigslist Erotic Services made sex work accessible to people who would never have considered doing it otherwise. I was one of those people.

It was the autumn of 2003. I'd come back to New York after an extended period away with the realization that yet again, I was flat broke. A struggling writer and artist, I'd been earning a living as a licensed massage therapist. I'd used Craigslist once before to find a subletter for my Brooklyn apartment. That had worked out incredibly well, so I decided to advertise my massage business there (in the therapeutic services section). It seemed ideal.

I confess that at that time, I was pretty disappointed with my love life. Like many New York females in their 30s, I still hadn't found Mr. Right. I was becoming increasingly frustrated at his failure to manifest. Love was desired, but seemed elusive. In the meantime, I dated. Oh boy, did I date. I was a professional dater and a longtime veteran of internet dating. I was on JDate when people found it eccentric. And I was having a lot of crappy experiences with men of dubious integrity. It had occurred to me more than once that I might as well be getting paid.

Thrown into this mix of loneliness and financial need was aggravation, aggravation that when I did begin advertising my massage business in the therapeutic services section of Craigslist, all anyone seemed to want was sex. I was indignant. I considered myself a healer. I had gone to massage school. I had studied a variety of healing modalities and been praised by my clients

as being extraordinarily gifted. I could cure sciatica and alleviate anxiety. I could soothe PMS and increase cervical mobility. I just wanted a few good regular clients. I had never blended my massage work with anything remotely sexual.

Nor had I ever so much as glanced at the erotic services section of Craigslist. But one day it came to my attention that many "providers" who should have been posting in the erotic services section were posting in the therapeutic section. I wrote to Craig Newmark. He graciously responded. He assured me that Craigslist would be more vigilant in removing misplaced ads. But for some reason, after that, I kept looking at the erotic services section. Something had snapped. I never would have expected it, but reading the ads had begun to turn me on.

I just want to pause here (in part because I can already hear the voices of my detractors and also because I don't want to appear insensitive to any human suffering). I recognize that I'm a privileged, educated woman who could have done many things for a living, but opted to do sex work largely because it was exciting to me. I recognize that there are women who do it reluctantly and out of necessity. I recognize that there are also women who are forced into doing it. I recognize that violence against sex workers and indeed against all women is a real threat and a dark shame. However, this piece is not about that; this is about me.

And what happened to me during the fall of 2003 was that boundaries I had heretofore firmly established and carefully guarded were becoming blurred. The combination of financial need, dissatisfaction with my love life, sexual frustration and some age-old fantasy that was stirred up in me from God-only-knows-where was taking over.

My world was changing.

The first time I had sex with a client it was entirely unpremeditated. A runner training for the New York Marathon, he'd come for what I thought would be a therapeutic massage. I was encouraged when he'd contacted me. I already had a number of regular clients who were distance runners and I found them to be very reliable -- the best of my clients.

He was trim, nice looking, clean-cut, but seemed a little nervous as I led him into my apartment. I tried to crack a couple jokes to set him at ease, then instructed him to disrobe and get onto the massage table -- underneath the towel, face down. The usual massage therapist schpeil. I left the room.

When I returned he was in position, so I began to massage him. I moved the towel out of the way and tucked it in slightly to cover his buttocks. Then I honed in on his legs since, from my experience with runners, legs are usually the trouble spot. His were long, lean, well-muscled.

But instead of relaxing, he continued to seem uncomfortable, squirming a little on the table, shifting his head in the face cradle.

"Do you not like the face cradle?" I asked.

"No, I want you to massage my whole body."

Perhaps I had been spending too much time on his legs. I began to massage his back and then his arms. But when I started to work on his hands, he suddenly grabbed mine and

clasped them in his.

Now, it's not like anything like this had never happened to me before, but ordinarily I would have quickly diffused the situation. What made it different this time was that a little jolt of sexual arousal had seized and overwhelmed me. Maybe I had been thinking about it too much, maybe I had actually already unconsciously resolved that I would do it, but the next thing I knew, I was on the table, naked and he was massaging me.

When it was time for him to leave, he asked me how much he owed me. Now it was my turn to feel uncomfortable. I knew that I had given him extra, a lot extra (although we didn't have intercourse) and I wanted extra. But I was too ashamed to ask for it.

"Well, I usually charge \$80, but you can tip me whatever you want."

He gave me \$160 and at that moment, I realized I had gone down a path I would never be able to retrace. It had been easy, pleasurable even. I would move on from there to greater and greener pastures.

I read the erotic services section almost everyday, until I found an ad I wanted to answer, an ad for an ongoing arrangement. He was offering a very tidy sum: \$3000/month for weekly meetings. I figured I had nothing to lose so I answered it, almost expecting to not hear back. When I did, I was floored. We had an email exchange over the course of the next few days. He wrote that although he was for the most part happily married, his relationship lacked "passion" and "eroticism." His writing was thoughtful and sincere. I became even more intrigued.

I sent him a series of incrementally more revealing photos with the head cropped off -- a virtual strip tease. When he asked to see my face, I told him that I'd have to talk to him on the phone first. He called from a real number, his work phone. The conversation reminded me of conversations I'd had during my internet dating days: we talked about ourselves, our hobbies. I told him about some of my art and writing projects.

We agreed that we would meet in public first and if I felt comfortable, I would give him a therapeutic massage. But since, at that time, my neighborhood hadn't been over run with cafés and condos, there really was nowhere to go. Through our communication, I'd grown comfortable enough with him to invite him over.

I fretted all day and changed my outfit several times in anticipation of his arrival. When I opened the door, he had a jacket draped over his arm and bemused expression on his face. He was in his mid-30s, very conservative looking, wearing a pin-striped oxford shirt and tidy, pleated khaki trousers.

At first I couldn't tell if he thought I was more or less beautiful than he'd imagined I'd be. But as we settled in to what would become our customary positions in my living room, I knew from the intensity of his gaze that I had him "hooked."

In a sense, I was "hooked" too. Not by him. He was, although pleasant looking and mild-mannered, a little bit dull. But I loved playing the seductress, I loved feeling him in my power. Exciting him excited me. The fantasy spurred me on.

We talked for a fairly long time and by the time we got down to the nitty gritty, I was very aroused. He gave me a huge orgasm, then a huge wad of bills. When he left, I was incredulous at my good fortune. "This is the best fucking job I ever had," I thought to myself.

Alan came to see me once or twice a week for a couple of months and then without warning stopped calling. I never knew why he'd lost interest, but I found myself a little distressed: not only from the loss of income I'd come to rely on, but also, whether or not I'd admit it to myself, I'd become a little attached. A friend who was a confidante at that time told me, "Dude's a john, not your boyfriend."

After that, I saw a few more men for both erotic massage and GFes (girlfriend experiences). They were mostly decent chaps, the kind of guys I might have known in real life, the kind of guys I might have gone to college with. Well, actually over scotch and conversation after a "session," I discovered that one of them did go to college with me.

Never once did I feel that I was in physical danger, although I recognized the possibility. The internet afforded me the ability to screen potential clients. For every ad I posted, I usually received a hundred or so responses. I could be very discriminating, so most of the sex was actually quite hot. I treated it as an extension of dating. And actually, most of the men I met on Craigslist Erotic Services treated me with more decency and consideration than many of the men I had previously been dating.

I didn't hawk my wares on Craigslist Erotic Services for terribly long, less than a year all told. And while I understand that this is not every woman's experience of being a sex worker, for me at that time in my life, it was liberating in certain ways. It made me feel relaxed with my body and allowed me to be experimental with my appetites. It liberated me from a part of myself that always tied or sought to tie sex to a deep emotional connection. It gave me insight into men and male sexuality that I hadn't had before.

But one thing it never gave me was the answer to a few burning questions:

Why can't we as a society have a rational, meaningful discourse about sex work, embracing all its nuances and contradictions?

How can work which never once made me feel exploited, injure and exploit so many other women?

Why does sex work seem to raise so many people's moral hackles, when what they should be angry about are the class distinctions which never once made me feel exploited?

And finally, why do we think that something which has never gone away can be eradicated by legislation or censorship?

My life as a "Craigslist hooker" ended when I fell in love, which was what I really wanted. Now Craigslist Erotic Services is gone. The providers and clients will undoubtedly move on. Perhaps into the therapeutic services section to irritate other earnest therapeutic massage practitioners like my one-time self. Perhaps the less fortunate will move onto the street where they will face even more grave danger.

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