

The Red Light and the Cloud — Futures Exchange — Medium

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The Fantasy Ranch has aluminum siding the same color as the sky. It sits on Missouri Highway 50, between Kansas City and the Whiteman Air Force Base. Isolated on the highway, it doesn't need anything more than its bulk and a sign to announce itself.

On Yelp, it has another name. *Million Dollar Fantasy Ranch*. There are no reviews, but there are two tips. George T., Yelp Elite user from Naples, FL, writes, "Tim 'Sully' recommends BYOB and get 3 for 1 lap dances." The only other review is from Tim S. from Wisconsin. It's doubtful they ever laid eyes on the faded silver trailer that houses the Million Dollar Fantasy Ranch. They could have been hundreds of miles away, on a business trip or drunk, or just up late on Yelp, clowning each other at the expense of the good standing of the only strip club in Warrensburg, Missouri.

On Google, its third suggested autocomplete reads, "is million dollar fantasy ranch still open."

Their reputation is perhaps untarnished yet. The Ultimate Strip Club List entry for the Million Dollar Fantasy Ranch shows 56 reviews, and an average rating of three stars. On December 10, 2013, Kcjhawk123 gives the atmosphere three stars, and the dancers three and a half. "The BYOB thing is weird, but not a huge deal," he writes. (George T. and Tim S. are perhaps to be trusted.)

In a May 15, 2010 YouTube video, Rick Ryan—the same elderly, bespectacled man who posted it—interviews a dancer at the Fantasy Ranch. Her name is Sarah. She laughs when he says her name. She tells him, "This is one of the best jobs you can have," and when he says, "oh girl, I can imagine you in the bedroom," she only rolls her eyes a little.

A May 16, 2010 review of the Fantasy Ranch on the The Ultimate Strip Club List begins, "Strange times on Highway 50."



Fantasy Ranch (2013, Melissa Gira Grant)

Fantasy Ranch. Before you enter, the name comes with a cloud of associations for the driver-by. Some of the legal brothels of rural Nevada are called "ranches." I imagine a different one. The writer, director, and former stripper Diablo Cody, before she won that Oscar, had a blog called the Pussy Ranch. I read it under red light, on shifts in a peep show. Only now seeing Fantasy Ranch on my way to spend Christmas holidays with my boyfriend's family do I ask myself, is it meant to evoke a ranch for rounding up pussy, like cattle, or like a dude ranch, one that extends hospitality to pussy? Are they product, or guest? In any instance, the ones I

regard as most corralled are the men.

The men, after all, invented the red light. Here's the story, as I've repeated it this year to a room full of first and second year law students, and to labor historians, and now to the internet. It's at least as true as a Yelp review.

When railroad workers left a shift to visit a local prostitute, it's said, they would take along a red signal light to leave outside her door, in case their boss needed to call them back to work. This explains why it's not until 1894, per the Oxford English Dictionary, that the phrase "red light district" appears in print. The red light, like a review on The Ultimate Strip Club List, is a message exchanged between men.

"Follow me"

Red Christmas lights will always throw me: we used them to decorate at the peep show, in the dungeon, as the backdrop for webcam shows. To see them strung now around the one-story houses of the men who work at Whiteman Air Force Base make their homes for a moment into brothels.

Any of them well may be. In a suburb especially, without so many hotels and apartments, it's not unusual for men to invite women they hire online into their homes.

Is that what the police will call those homes, if they stage a raid on one? Or is a home only a brothel when it's the woman's place? In San Francisco, in 2004, federal immigration and customs officials raided four completely average looking suburban homes in the Sunset district, removing the women who were said to work there selling sex, three thousand condoms, and over \$30,000 in cash. A year later, four hundred federal and local law enforcement officers targeted eleven more "suspected brothels," an investigation they called "Operation Gilded Cage."

After one of the O'Farrell Street buildings believed to be a brothel was raided, a neighbor told a reporter at the *San Francisco Chronicle*, "I thought they were going after Osama bin Laden. There were many people running at full speed. I thought there was a terrorist attack."

How did anyone find brothels, before we had the internet? In ancient Greece, it's said, one of the many classes of prostitutes was called the "earth beaters," so named for their signature sandals, the bottoms scored with a message. As they walked the streets, they'd leave behind them a trail of the words "Follow me." The artist Norene Leddy reproduced these for the 21st century, swapping leather and dust for silver platforms and GPS and Google maps.

Maybe the brothel is something a woman who sells sex carries with her. (Do men who sell sex do it in brothels? Somehow the word doesn't stick to men the same way, even though it's true that they do sell sex, in lots of places.)

Maybe the brothel is in the cloud, like a burst of aerosol spray. She floats in on it.



Stunt sociologist Sudhir Venkatesh called his recent book on sex work in New York *Floating City*. We've left the "floating world" for this century, yet he offers the same old fairy tale that when sex is sold, commerce is unmoored, outside the norm, off the map, placeless. It is a place for the outcast, for drifters, and for the rest of society—like him—to only pass through.

The first American laws used against women believed to be selling sex were actually laws against vagrancy. The tramp, points out Kathi Weeks in *The Problem With Work*, is not just a jobless man on the road, but a woman alone who might offer her body.

Tramps, whores: their real problem, we're told, isn't making ends meet. It's that they've got no boundaries.

Friends and neighbors

In the winter of 1899, when the Everleigh sisters, Ada and Minna, headed to Chicago to open what they would call the finest brothel in the United States, "*segregation* was a term that referred primarily to sex rather than race," writes Karen Abbott in *Sin and the Second City*. In the red light district, "men were free to indulge sexually without sullyng their homes or offend the fragile sensibilities of their wives."

By train, the sisters visited San Francisco, New Orleans, New York, and Washington to evaluate the red light districts of each, before settling on the twin mansions spanning fifty rooms at 2131 and 2133 South Dearborn Street in Chicago. By plane, these are the same cities women would travel into the next century, a circuit connected by madams and black books, swelled with men during trade shows and conferences, emptied in progression, and then on to the next.

One hundred years after the Everleigh sisters settled in Chicago, in San Francisco Craig Newmark launched the Erotic Services section of his community listings website craigslist, an open, auto-refreshing market for sex ads. The Erotic Services section expanded with craigslist, first to Boston, then Chicago, New York, Washington. The circuit shuffled, just like the newspaper classifieds Newmark replaced, a bit closer to obsolescence.

The Ultimate Strip Club List reaches here to Warrensburg. In my head, though I'm not sure I've ever heard it spoken aloud, I pronounce the website's acronym TUSCL as "tussle." Like a hand ruffling someone's hair, scrunching up the strands of stories and associations that radiate out

from fifty-six reviews, the top three results of an autocomplete algorithm, a couple of tips left on Yelp.

Each red light has a vaster red cloud.

Gold dust girlfriends

The recently retired cattle rancher John Perry Barlow was in Wyoming when he accepted a telephone call from the software developer Mitchell Kapor, who was in his private plane above North Dakota. Could Mitch drop in for a visit? “While a late spring snow storm swirled outside my office,” Barlow writes, “we spent several hours hatching what became the Electronic Frontier Foundation.”

The Electronic Frontier Foundation was one of the first organizations to weigh in on the possibility of law enforcement crackdowns on advertising sex-for-sale online. “I’m guessing they might use the network to set up an assignation, then arrest whoever showed up,” Mike Godwin, then a staff attorney, told Carol Leigh of the Prostitutes’ Education Network. “I doubt they’re staying after hours to play this game—fortunately, the skills it takes to hang out on the Internet are greater than the ones it takes to play Sega.” This was in 1995.

In recent years, EFF has warded off the criminalization of online sex ads, launching challenges to Washington state and New Jersey laws passed specifically to target Backpage.com, laws which would also widely restrict online speech. Washington abandoned its law when it became clear it was unconstitutionally broad.

One of my more memorable email exchanges of this year was with the FBI field office in Denver. They’d just issued a press release marking what they deemed a successful sex trafficking investigation, netting twenty-two arrests—all adult women working as escorts. No sex trafficking charges were filed, their spokesman confirmed for me, only state and local prostitution-related charges. Their target wasn’t a “trafficking ring” (a phrase now almost as void of fact as the word “brothel”), but an online message board, where escorts privately shared information about dangerous customers.

“We set up these types of operations to see if any of the females that are in this line of work are a victim of human trafficking,” their media coordinator wrote to me. Speech meant for women’s own protection had been flagged as a potential threat.

I asked the FBI spokesman, “Was that the case—that these women were trafficking victims?”

No, he replied. “They were not trafficking victims in these cases.”

“We believe that critical to taming the electronic frontier is creating a sense of the stakes among both the computer literate and the general public,” writes Barlow in November 1990. But there’s no frontier now, and maybe there never was one, and if it ever was in need of taming, from what?

And for whose sake? Who always goes first into the frontier? Who is always first corralled and removed?

The Everleigh sisters, in their way, were the last wave of the sex trade's gilded age frontierswomen, borne from the soiled doves who made their living off the gold dust men.

It's an old notion of prostitution: that some time on the sexual frontier is required for men to remain civilized. Sex doesn't dirty or diminish them. It merely keeps them in their place. Ada and Minna wanted more than that. In their handsome mirrored brothel, they sought, as Karen Abbott writes, "to uplift the profession, remove its stain and stigma, and argue that a girl can't lose her social standing if she stands level with those poised to judge her."

Leaning way the fuck out

What the Everleighs did echoes forward today. Watch Sasha Grey recline carelessly on interchangeable beds and in pristine black cars in *The Girlfriend Experience*, or ask your actual girlfriend who is an escort: what's your online strategy? Grey's character is vexed in the film not by the men she fucks, but the one man who runs the website where her customers can review their fucking.

The Girlfriend Experience was not a film about sexual labor, but about committing to emotional labor as the lights burn out in the physical economy, leaving rich only the kinds of people who can afford continuous, customized service-with-a-smile. Grey's boyfriend in the film is a personal trainer, whisked off to Vegas in a private plane, a companion to his client and his friends. Meanwhile, Grey interviews potential clients by telephone, attends casual networking lunches with girlfriends in the business, and responds to her email. She spends more time perfecting the image of her business—which includes her body—than having sex with men.

We used to call this service work, feminized labor—what the prostitute does, what the trainer does—but it's becoming all our jobs. Even the internet itself, writes Paul Ford, is defined by the question of performing adequate service, answering for users before they make the demand themselves, "Why wasn't I consulted?" Caring, or looking like it, is the business model. We manufacture feelings and the process by which we can attach a price to them.

Karen Gregory, who studies digital labor, flags this feature of the future of work, of constant connectivity and availability, and what others are calling hyperemployment, as the status quo already for many of us. It feels different to some, she suggests, because those who are defining this phenomenon are precisely the ones least likely to have experienced it yet.

Women workers have always maintained a second shift, stretching now into the permanent shift. With her "lean in" refrain, Sheryl Sandberg is not a trailblazer, but simply one more voice joining the hyperemployment call. And Gregory illuminates what the red light always has: someone's good time is often someone else's job. (Think again of Sandberg's lean in circles, celebrated before they began: is that a networking event for you, or public relations for her?) Somewhere, in

some bed, with a light set down beside it, someone's work is always on.

I never shared this in the thick of the complaints about Sandberg, but the honorific for one of the goddesses said to protect prostitutes in the ancient Middle East is *the one who leans out*.

There is still a frontier, and some of us have already been there, and came back.

The motion of light in the network

Every few years, some hopeful entrepreneurs pop up to revive the idea of moving sex to its own domain extension, as if it could be confined to .xxx. It fails, every time. Craigslist got it right by putting sex for sale alongside other freelance gigs, and sofas, and roommate listings, and for that it was punished in front of Congress and in the press. But can anyone say sex for sale went anywhere but just another URL away?

The red light district isn't only within the network; it is the network. Like Chicago, New Orleans, New York, San Francisco, Washington at the turn of the last century, some still speak of segregation. But the way sex moves—has always moved, through cities, through cables—makes that incomplete and unlikely. We are on the same servers. We contend with common gatekeepers: not old-timers Anthony Comstock or Rudy Giuliani, but the likes of Google and AT&T.

The future of selling sex is in the network, but the future has been here for some time. In railroad days and in the hands of Silicon Valley's new robber barons, the sex industry reaches beyond bodies to the persistent flickering of codes, signs, and attractions passing between them. Selling sex has always required a vehicle for communication operating just out of view. That girl, like the network, has no boundaries. She's everywhere, all the time, casting off red-hot flares only when she wishes.