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Recklessly Seeking Sex on Craigslist

By DOUGLAS QUENQUA

THIS is it, Melvin thought: Craigslist is about to get me killed.

A recent divorcee who lacked the money and confidence for a conventional date, Melvin, 35, had been lured to a stranger's apartment by the promise of anonymous sex. He had already done this at least a dozen times, using classified ads he had placed on the Casual Encounters section of Craigslist.com, with no problems.

But this time, all he found was a dark, scary room.

"I was like, 'Oh no, this is it — this woman is going to kill me,'" he recalled.

Luckily for Melvin, what he had wandered into was something a bit more poignant: the woman who had answered his ad was obese and didn't want Melvin to see her body.

"It was sad, very sad," he said, "but she was a nice girl and we talked for two hours before we went in the bedroom and did what we did."

This is probably not the hedonistic situation most people envision when they think about Internet hookups. Nor was it a violent encounter that makes headlines, like the murder on April 14 in a Boston hotel room of a 26-year-old woman, Julissa Brisman, who had placed an ad for masseuse services on Craigslist, or the killing last month of George Weber, a radio news reporter who was stabbed in his Brooklyn home, police say, by a teenager who apparently answered a Craigslist ad seeking a sexual partner.

Reactions to Mr. Weber's murder among a number of people who regularly use Craigslist in search of casual sex ranged from mildly concerned to indifferent. Melvin called it a "shame" and reiterated his safety policy, adopted after his close call with the obese woman in her darkened apartment. "That's why I'm always cautious, always meet in public," he said.

Michael, 34, a straight man who lives in Midtown Manhattan and who has been using the Casual Encounters board on Craigslist for five years, said, "In a city of eight million-plus, this sort of thing was bound to happen statistically."

Although sex is solicited online in many places — legally and otherwise — the Casual Encounters listings are a major hub, offering to do for casual sex what the rest of the site does for no-fee apartments, temp jobs and old strollers.

Like bathhouses and sex clubs, the Casual Encounters section caters to the erotic underbelly of society,

where courtship gives way to expediency and anonymity is a virtue (or at least a turn-on). The section was introduced in late 2000 and is available in all cities served by Craigslist, for users gay and straight, male and female. The ads range from prim to raunchy; a good number of people include photographs of precisely what they have to offer. (The site has a policy against posting pornographic pictures, but it does not seem to be enforced very vigorously.)

In an exploration of the Casual Encounters world, more than 100 e-mail messages were sent to users requesting interviews before the recent murders. About a dozen frequent users, mostly men, consented to phone or e-mail interviews, some of which took place over the past three months.

Two men, Michael and Melvin, were willing to meet with a reporter in person, as long as they were identified only by their name on Craigslist. A few women who had posted ads were also forthcoming, but none of the women who had replied to Michael's or Melvin's ads consented to an interview.

Ads in the Casual Encounters section account for 2 percent of all Craigslist postings, according to the company. It also says that traffic to all the Craigslist personals sites — which include a separate one for romance and one for “missed connections,” where people try to find the cutie they flirted with on the L train — is higher than for any other online personals site, including Match.com, eHarmony and Yahoo personals.

“Casual Encounters was created in response to user demand for a section that allowed for a wide range of personal meeting and relationship options,” Craig Newmark, the founder of Craigslist, said by e-mail message before the recent murders took place. “In that sense, it's probably an accurate inside look at how people like to connect these days. Our users like the ability to be both candid and, initially, anonymous.”

Within Casual Encounters, the most traditional of the categories — men seeking women — seems to raise the most tantalizing questions, given the reasonable assumption that most women (and even a few men) would prefer earnest courtship to a quickie with a stranger, no strings attached. For instance, does it really work?

The short answer is “yes.” But as with so many things on Craigslist, the truth is a little dingier than what was promised. Among the stories told by users of Casual Encounters are those about the eager 22-year-old who turns out to be too shy to go through with it (and she's really 30); the woman who seems docile by e-mail but who turns violent after smoking a joint; and the single mother who lies about dropping the children off at their grandmother's house for the night.

And then there are the legions of prostitutes and spammers who threaten to take over the Casual Encounters “community,” which longtime users insist that it is.

“I think three or four years ago it was kind of a local community,” Michael said. “You'd bump into the same people, and they weren't advertising or looking for services.”

Tales of sexual encounters via Craigslist run the gamut from the erotic to the bizarre. Nola, a 42-year-old saleswoman who lives in Manhattan, posts elegantly written ads seeking a man who will meet her in a public place so she can go to the bathroom and remove her panties, which she will then hand to him in an envelope.

Michael, who is handsome and projects confidence, says he is an artist who began using the site to find models who would pose nude for him. Craigslist, he said, often fulfills its promise of delivering erotic thrills for a minimal effort.

"I've met some extraordinarily beautiful women, had a few extraordinary sexual encounters that made my teeth itch and my brain sweat, put me in states of weird contemplation like, 'My God, I've never experienced that before,'" he said.

Other men tell of sad, isolated women using the lure of easy sex to find companionship.

Melvin, who has thick brown hair and a pleasant, soft-spoken manner, said he began using the site when his wife left him for another man six months after their wedding. He describes the women he meets on Craigslist as "desperados."

"For some reason, guys are not interested in them," he said, "and when push gets to shove, they're so lonely that they think, 'You know what, I'll get a guy to come see me and see what happens.'"

Melvin concedes he could easily be describing his own state of mind after his divorce. "I didn't want to go out and have to talk about my divorce any more," he said. "But here I had somewhere to go online to meet people who were kind of antisocial like me, and it fills that void of loneliness."

Indeed, Melvin has dated a few women he was supposedly meeting just for sex, and even went out with one young woman, a recent transplant to New York from the South, several times without ever receiving so much as a kiss.

Erick Janssen, a researcher and associate scientist at the Kinsey Institute for Research in Sex, Gender, and Reproduction, said that some need sex and sexual novelty more than others. "We know from basic sex research that anonymity can augment satisfaction in sexual arousal," he said.

As for Casual Encounters, he said, "What's going on isn't that different from years ago when people would go to different cities and nightclubs, and of course they still do."

Tom Brady, chief medical officer at the CRC Health Group in Cupertino, Calif., an addiction-treatment center, said there is no single personality type that is drawn to sites like Casual Encounters, but there are common denominators, like a penchant for risk-seeking.

"A lot of these people have a narcissistic, sociopathic side where they don't have a lot of empathy for other people," he said. "The Internet is fabulous for these people."

Casual Encounters is also a haven for people with sex addictions. "They're like a kid in a candy store," Dr. Brady said.

Nola, for instance, said in a telephone interview that she got an erotic thrill from giving men her used underwear, knowing they would serve as fetish objects. She started doing this last June after she thought, "I wear underpants every single day of my life, and somebody's got to want these underpants." The recipients, she said, pay her a small replacement fee.

Nola has acquired a stalker as a result of her actions, but still distributes her panties. She does not have sex with the men she meets online, meets them only in public places, and keeps a file of their names and photos, making sure a friend knows where to find it. She doesn't limit herself to straight men. "I put ads up for lesbians looking for women's undies, gay men looking for undies, rough-and-tumble guys," she said. "This is just me sitting and being silly."

That there is prostitution on the site is no secret. In 2006, Nassau County set up a prostitution sting operation focusing on Craigslist; around the country, the police routinely arrest prostitutes operating on the site. Craigslist reached an agreement last year with state attorneys general to charge a \$5 fee and require a phone number for people posting "erotic services." A company statement said the move led to an immediate 80 percent drop in postings to that section.

Casual Encounters users say those people have simply resurfaced on their turf. "What that's done is made Casual Encounters just one big free-for-all, and like one ugly market," Michael said.

Men willing to pay for sex often disguise their intent slightly by using "roses" as code for money, as in, "I have 100 roses for someone willing to spend the afternoon with me."

Also rampant is the search for drugs. Cocaine users say they are looking to "ski" or searching for "ski bunnies" who will presumably trade sex for drugs, and pot smokers use a longtime code term for marijuana, 420, to identify themselves.

Other sites have popped up in recent years to siphon off the Casual Encounters crowd, like AshleyMadison.com, which helps married people find affairs. There is no pretense that anything but sex is being offered, which is just fine for people with louche tastes looking to avoid polite society.

"My mother is on Match.com," Melvin said. "So there's no way I'm going to be on there."