

CHEAP THRILLS

Canadian House and Home

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It began innocently enough. I needed a bed, and I didn't want to pay retail. So I went on Craigslist.org, the online classifieds, and found a perfectly serviceable model for a great price, right in my neighborhood. The seller's gift with purchase was to make her brother dismantle the thing at no extra cost. The process was ridiculously painless. Thus emboldened, I posted an ad to Houdini out of one of those life sentence cell phone contracts, found a buyer, saved three hundred bucks, and, in one day, was free at last. By the time I'd scored a primo pair of Dylan tickets on the site, I considered myself a pro. That seller requested that we make the exchange outside the Rainforest Cafe at Toronto's Yorkdale Mall. Granted, a suburban shopping mall would not be my first pick for a walk on the wild side, and maybe I need to get out more, but I'd be lying if I didn't admit to feeling a little dangerous about meeting my dealer to conduct a transaction this way.

And so, I started hanging out on Craigslist. I didn't need anything. I just liked the frisson, and seeing what was for sale. As it turned out, everything was for sale; Craigslist was a booming underground economy. (Launched by Craig Newmark in 1995 as a

San Francisco Bay Area e-mail newsletter, it rapidly morphed into the leading classified service in the world. Ads are painless to post, almost always free, and all enquiries are made through the site.)

There were books (Martha Stewart's Good Things, \$8), tools (Black & Decker leaf blower, \$50), and appliances (a vintage Frigidaire refrigerator, \$200). Equally diverting was the stuff that people were looking to find (People magazine January 8, 2007 "Half Their Size" issue). The site fulfilled my needs on a number of fronts—it was wildly entertaining, it gave me license to procrastinate (I was there for a higher purpose—i.e. saving money), and it provided a fascinating insight into people's lives.

At first, I didn't discriminate. I looked at real estate, DVDS, even auto parts. I had my favourites, of course. RVs were rewarding. So were furniture and collectibles. But no category amused me more than barter, except, perhaps, the online booth for people who were giving away stuff for free. At the barter bazaar, you could get a Hebrew tutor (make me an offer), a computer techie, a 135-gallon aquarium (in exchange for a boat), a drive to Tennessee, singing lessons (for legal assistance), and a Florida condo. For free, though, you could get insanely good deals: 80 empty wine bottles, a toilet (avocado), 16 litres of oil from a deep fryer (for biodiesel purposes), a birdcage—even dental cleanings by a student hygienist. As for household services advertised for a

fee? Don't even get me started: handymen, cleaning ladies, professionals who specialized in an apparently in-demand specialty called drain alerts.

For many people, of course, eBay and the like are a way of life. But what made my infatuation so striking was that I'd always been a lackluster bargain sleuth. I didn't have the patience or the knack. If I did find a fabulous score, it was less through hard work than happenstance. On Craigslist, I became a bloodhound. It's where I developed my chops.

Learning to appreciate the thrill of the hunt is a talent I've acquired rather late in life. Still, like many rote shoppers, I've always admired those clever souls who scour thrift shops, haunt curbsides and rise at dawn to dumpster dive. I know an effortlessly stylish woman, for instance, who only buys on sale or second-hand. When I compliment her finds, she laughingly reveals the cost, and I respond with fitting awe. Her husband, meanwhile, an accomplished chef and conspiracy theorist, has a vintage cookbook and JFK memorabilia collection. Value Village has him on speed dial. Their hallway is adorned with an artful, signed and dated black-and-white photograph of eight dancing women at the Casino de Paris, 1975, that he unearthed there for a couple of bucks. Their last dinner party was served on an end-of-the-line set of dinnerware that he'd scored at the dollar store for a buck a plate;

they could easily have come from Crate & Barrel. I love this couple's improvisational approach to home décor; they're proof positive that style is always less about money than savvy and an artful imagination.

Before I started loitering on Craigslist, I'd had my little flings, of course. I'd trolled the occasional garage sale and flea market, and even picked up some impressive finds. But now I know I was just an amateur. Like a package tourist who never strays from the beaten path, I was stuck in a rut. I lacked discipline and focus. It was easier to throw money at the problem. Now I may never pay retail again. But it's not just the price that has me charmed. Equally alluring for an impetuous, mistake-prone shopper like me is the chance to take my time. With sweet deals cropping up hourly, even stragglers can win at this game.

And so, like all converts to a cause, I'm obnoxious in my born-again ways. My crash course in learning to think like a student again has not only been fun and rewarding, it has made me feel young again—and smarter about money in almost every way. For someone unlikely to keep flyers, clip coupons, or drive out of her way to save pennies on gas, Craigslist is the perfect compromise; not the least of its benefits is the chance it has afforded me to discover my latent, but apparently enthusiastic, sensible self. Who knew I was a closet bargain hunter? Or that,

with the right sponsor, I could actually learn to shop? Craigslist changed my life. You should try it sometime.