



It Happened To Me

I WAS CRAIGSLIST SCAMMED SO YOU DON'T HAVE TO BE

Do not allow my utter dumbassness to have been in vain. Learn from my mistakes so that your future Craigslist endeavors can be a little less dramatic and a lot more cost-effective.



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First things first: For someone not routinely seeking Casual Encounters, I'm an unusually faithful Craigslist enthusiast.

Craig launched the list in my hometown of San Francisco, I found my first post-college job on CL, and sporadically perusing local Missed Connections always arouses a cheap, cheery smile and the fleeting feeling that love-at-first-sight romance is real.

If that sort of grade-A, wide-eyed B.S. doesn't tip you off to the fact that I'm a naive sucker, you should also know that I always think I can nab a toy from those stupid claw crane arcade games. It happened once, but that's another story.

The point is, despite the [disturbing experience](#) I had this summer

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subletting an illegitimate apartment from a shady con man, I'm by no means anti-Craigslist. It's a great resource and I'd have no qualms using again. Yet there's a multitude of must-dos every renter should check off the list before handing over cash, and I pretty much blatantly disregarded those.

I implore you, dear readers: Do not allow my utter dumbassness to have been in vain. Learn from my mistakes so that your future Craigslist endeavors can be a little less dramatic and a lot more cost-effective.

Must-do #1: GET IT IN WRITING. That deafening roar you hear is the sound of a thousand "duhs" resonating in my direction.

As an otherwise mentally sound adult human, I have no excuse for not demanding a written contract from the renter. But I was in that space between stressed and psychotic, trying desperately to pin down a place to stay during my Los Angeles-based summer internship. Not to mention, I was attempting to do it from 500 miles away in Berkeley while finishing up my first year of grad school. So when a completely bare-bones, uber-vague listing for a West Hollywood rental popped up, I swooped.

After engaging in what I thought was some good old-fashioned, second-generation-immigrant haggling, the subletter said he'd "cut me a deal" because "A dollar today beats a dollar tomorrow apparently :)" Never ever put your faith in a smiley-face-wielding man desperate for cash.

I guess I felt burdened with some sort of foolish guilt about the guy dropping his asking price just to accommodate my meager finances. How dare I demand a written agreement too? He was acting as easy-breezy as a "Top Model" contestant on her first CoverGirl photoshoot, so I just followed suit. No contract? Oh, that's cool, man. Playing it casual, then. I dig it. Yeah, no. Remember, you're trying to not be a dumbass. Always get the terms of any transaction down *in writing* before you fork over your savings.

Must-do #2: Actually read those [helpful hints](#) on Craigslist.

Imagine my surprise to find that the fine folks at CL have taken the

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time to compile some fraud-dodging tips. And where, might you demand to know, are these cautionary messages sneakily buried on the site? Well, the link is on the front page, so there goes my excuse for blowing them off. Now, these are by no means sure-fire methods for entirely avoiding sticky situations, and quite honestly, even if I had taken three seconds to read them, they may not have spared me the scamming of a lifetime.

For example, the number one HIGHLIGHTED, ALL CAPS rule is: “DEAL LOCALLY WITH FOLKS YOU CAN MEET IN PERSON.” But that’s not always possible to do, shouty Craigslisters! I was stuck at school, so the best I could do was employ skills normally reserved for Facebook-stalking cute strangers and deploy an LA-based friend to pay the renter a visit.

Yet everything on the surface checked out: Mr. Craigslist passed her sociopath assessment test with flying colors. I had an hour-long Skype interview with the guy that went swimmingly. Googling his name even turned up a lengthy list of legitimate sites, including a detailed Wikipedia page chronicling his overseas professional basketball career. Were this an adorkable episode of *New Girl*, he would’ve been the Winston to my Jess. But alas, my brand of quirky is more suited for disaster-prone reality than prime-time comedy.

So maybe Craigslist’s explicit rules wouldn’t have come in handy, but had I at least scanned their tips, I might’ve been reminded of one glaringly obvious scam element: “Deal often *sounds too good to be true*.” Former pro basketball player conveniently vacating his ideally located West Hollywood rental for the exact period of time required and willing to slash asking price by hundreds of dollars? What was I waiting for? Red flags, sirens, flashing lights, and a swarm of locusts to alert me to danger?

Must-do #3: Ask for references. Despite my friend’s glowing evaluation, Google’s flattering results, and my own positive Skype experience, I couldn’t shake the feeling that something was off with Mr. Craigslist. I couldn’t explain why, but some sixth Spidey sense was tingling, signaling something shady (more on that extrasensory awareness later). Instead of stuffing my skepticism beneath a pile of unfounded optimism and sweet, soothing chocolate, I could have, you

know, gone with that feeling and done a bit more research. Had I spoken with any of his former employers, landlords, or -- perhaps most importantly -- current neighbors, I might've picked up on the fact that this guy was, for lack of a better word, *troubled*.

Two days after moving in, a blonde bombshell holding a snow white, moptopped maltipoo stopped me in the parking lot, kindly asking who the hell I was. Since I hadn't signed a contract (REFER TO RULE #1), I assumed maybe Mr. Craigslist was allowing me to stay despite some silly, strict rule in his rental agreement that prohibited subletting. Kind soul that I am, I lied in an effort to protect the dear, innocent man. "Oh, I'm just a friend crashing on his couch!" I smiled with asinine confidence.

"So you won't be staying for long then...?" she asked in an enchanting southern drawl. I panicked. I stuttered. A spark of recognition mixed with pity for my pathetic soul ignited her soft blue eyes. "Because you know he got evicted Monday, right?" And then my brain imploded.

Must-do #4: Trust your gut. It appears that even the most directionally and intuitionally challenged among us have animal instincts. Believe it or not, you can sense when something's wrong. Sure, you might be labeled a distrustful, paranoid freak for tuning into your suspicion-seeking senses, but you'll be a paranoid freak with a tight grip on your hard-earned cash money, too.

Now, I've never been one to trust my instincts. Mainly because I've never demonstrated having any: My sense of direction is non-existent. I can't be sure I'd survive a camping trip. My fight-or-flight reactions are so delayed, I often just endure whatever physical threat is barreling toward me.

But after the hot blonde neighbor broke the news of Mr. Craigslist's eviction and I regained feeling in my extremities, she broke it all down for me and confirmed that the tingling Spidey sense I'd experienced wasn't a fluke.

Mr. CL had scammed three separate groups of would-be renters that week. After each ill-fated pack transferred cash into his account, he

stood them up on the day they'd arranged to move in and cut off further contact. He'd allowed me the great privilege of moving in only because the finalized eviction meant he'd have to vacate the property immediately anyway. He figured it couldn't hurt to let an unsuspecting idiot (that's me!) squat there until the sheriff's scheduled arrival. That's called chivalry, friends.

In the end, Savannah and her magical neighbors saved my summer, secured me an alternative apartment, and taught me that I can in fact survive some of life's more heinous situations. But not every scam victim is so incredibly lucky, and there really are a lot of sucky people out there who will do sucky, sucky things to you if you don't have at least a little bit of a guard up. So take heed and learn from my monumental mistakes. And happy cautious Craigslisting.

I'll just be over here creepily reading your Missed Connections if you need me.