

When Helen Smart was three, her father pushed her down a flight of stairs and fractured her skull. He had been home drinking all day—out in the living room in his underwear, the usual loop of pornos on the TV. That day he got angry, frustrated with the accumulation of life's pressures, but ostensibly frustrated with the clumsiness of three-year-olds: His daughter had fallen and was crying again. He grabbed her by the arm and spun her off her axis and down the stairs. Not long after, Smart's mother moved her out.

Now 19, Smart has blue eyes and caramel-colored hair. In the past year, she says, she's added weight to her tallish frame. A thin scar still constellates the crest of her forehead. She says she hasn't

seen or heard from her father in 12 years. And her real name is not in fact Helen Smart; she agreed to speak to the *Indy* on the condition that we not use her name, for reasons that might be clear shortly.

After she left her father's home, Smart went to a public elementary school in Missoula where she loved art class and, despite a secular upbringing, became interested in Bible studies. "My friend Heather took me to after-school Bible study," she explains, "because if you brought somebody, you and your friend got to pick a toy out of the treasure box." Smart's mother, who has worked at least two jobs all Smart's life, wasn't home much, so Smart began attending Bible study as often as it was offered. Eventually she went to sleep-away Bible camp on Flathead Lake. She

enjoyed the hiking, swimming and craft-making, but most of all, she says, she liked that "nobody knew who I was, and I could be myself. I do well in situations like that."

For ninth grade, Smart switched school districts, enrolling at the public high school across the Missoula Valley. Her freshman year, she again felt invigorated by the prospect of being new. "I went to school with the same kids for nine years," she says, "I went to [high school] and there were Goths and girls that dressed like hoers...there were so many kids." That year, she earned a 4.0 grade-point average.

Toward the end of Smart's freshman year, her mother began to date for the first time since leaving Smart's father. The new boyfriend moved into their house about a month after Smart met him.

When he worked, he hung dry wall, but he didn't work often, and he drank a lot. And Smart's mother and her boyfriend became swingers, inviting friends over for sex. "They didn't have swinger parties, but someone would come over and it was obvious what was going on," she says.

About this time, between freshman and sophomore years, Smart says she became aware of herself in a newly autonomous way—she could date. She began seeing a freshman at the University of Montana who lived in university housing with his uncle, also a student, and two cousins. It was in his apartment that Smart had sex for the first time. They had been drinking, and though she says it was awkward, she felt fine afterward, even relieved. "The only reason I lost my virginity," she explains, "was because my

DOWN THE RABBIT HOLE

RICHARD CARPITA WAS LOOKING FOR MONEY. HE ALREADY HAD THE GIRLS.

by Jamie Rogers



Photo by Chad Harder



Photo by Chad Harder

Richard Carpita, Montana State Prison, July 2011.

best friend lost her virginity." Soon after, Smart says, the boy cheated on her with an older girl.

Sophomore year, Smart began smoking pot regularly and experimenting with meth, cocaine, and painkillers. In the early spring, she and a friend were caught in study hall with a pipe and suspended from school. Smart dropped out two weeks before her sixteenth birthday.

Her mother sent her to rehab at Missoula's Turning Point Addiction Services, where she underwent treatment three days a week for six months. From rehab, she enrolled in Job Corps where she began training in culinary arts. After six weeks, she was expelled from the program when her drug test came up positive for THC. She then enrolled at Willard Alternative School. By this time, Smart says, she had already received several of her "five or six" minor-in-possession tickets, one of which came when she was pulled over for drunk driving. When she started at Willard, the conditions of her probation mandated that she not leave Missoula County. A month or so after her first day of classes, Smart attended a party at an apartment complex in Hamilton. The party was busted and a police officer found her hiding behind a door, a bottle of Sailor Jerry's rum in her purse. She was expelled from Willard.

In March, weeks before her eighteenth birthday, a friend whom Smart had met in Job Corps took her to a party

at a trailer a few blocks from the Aspen Motel in East Missoula. The trailer was crowded and filthy, she recalls, with dirty dishes and garbage stacked on the counters. A girl who appeared to be wearing a wig was wrapped in a blanket on the couch. Someone tried to move her, but she wouldn't get up, apparently content to sleep amidst the cackle of late-night partying.

The trailer was rented by Richard Carpita, a then 29-year-old Michigan native who had moved to Missoula four years earlier to work petitioning for the decriminalization of marijuana. That night, he took Smart aside and told her that if she ever needed any help, needed any money, she should let him know. She didn't immediately understand what he meant. Smart's friend told her.

LONELY? NEW IN TOWN?

In April 2010, Smart got into a Honda sedan in the Good Food Store parking lot and pretended to know the man behind the wheel. Smart called herself Angela. She remembers it was sunny and warmer than usual, and as the man drove, they talked casually, as if they were meeting for some other reason. "If you're shy," she says, "it just makes the whole situation more awkward than it needs to be."

The man had a grey beard. He wore a Hawaiian-style shirt with fishing-lure print. Smart thinks he was in his mid-60s. He met her after responding to an

ad in Craigslist-Missoula's "Casual Encounters, women-seeking-men" section. The gist of the ad was benign: "New in town? Let's have some fun." The man texted the phone number in the ad. It's not clear whom he thought he was corresponding with, but it was not Helen Smart. They decided on a time and a place, and negotiated a rate: \$200 per hour.

The man drove with Smart to the Aspen Motel in East Missoula and paid for a room. Smart says they had sex for about an hour. She says he was aggressive but she didn't feel unsafe. She had to draw the line only once, she adds, when the man tried to tie a bandana around her eyes. She remembers it was good in unexpected ways—"It was the very best sex I've ever had," she says.

That was Smart's first job.

Afterward, the man gave her \$200. Then she crossed the street to Ole's Country Store where she met Richard Carpita. It was Carpita who had placed the ad on Craigslist and set up the date. He would later say he decided to charge \$200 per hour because "that's what all the other escort services in town were charging." He took half the cash.

Smart went home to a family friend's Westside Missoula house, where she and her mom were living. She took a shower. "I didn't feel dirty," she explains. "I felt really weird. I just thought, 'Thank God it's done.' It was an empty feeling."

That night, she hung out with friends. Summer was nearing, days growing longer, and the following month

some of them would graduate from Willard. Smart said nothing about what she had done that day, about how her life was now different. But she thought about it, about how it was not as bad as it might have been, about the money she had earned, and, she says, "I knew I'd do it again."

A week later, Carpita sent her a text message.

BUSINESS TAKES OFF

Richard Carpita has two tattoos on his right forearm. One is a silhouette of the devil in moonlight, the logo of his favorite hip-hop group, which is from Detroit. The other is a darkly inked shape: abutting parallelograms that seem an abstraction of Maori tattoo art. Carpita says he got that one because he was drunk and he wanted to get a tattoo.

In November 2009, Carpita was released from Missoula County Jail, where he'd served four months on convictions related to a DUI, repeated failures to appear in court, and violating the conditions of his probation (Carpita owns a laundry list of priors related to drugs, alcohol, and one weapons charge dating back to his adolescence in Battle Creek, Michigan).

After a brief stint living with a friend's family, Carpita began renting a trailer on East Missoula's Montana Avenue. Before long, then 20-year-old Anthony Brazington moved in. According to Carpita, it was Brazington who knew a girl who wanted to have a threesome



Anthony Brazington

with the new roommates. The girl was a sometimes-Hellgate High School student with an impulse to pull out tufts of her dark hair. At times she wore a wig to hide patches of exposed scalp. She was 16.

One day in early March, while commiserating about their mutual lack of cash, Carpita mentioned to Brazington that they could place an ad on Craigslist for their new teenage friend. Brazington was skeptical, not about the ethics so much as the feasibility, but Carpita assured him it could work.

Craigslist ad. So we asked [the 16-year-old] if she wanted to go on a date, and she was like, 'Hell yeah.' She knew exactly what we meant."

Soon after that first job, a second girl, age 15, started spending time at Carpita and Brazington's trailer. She'd recently been released from a juvenile detention center in Spokane and was staying with her mom in a nearby house. According to Carpita, she had been working as a prostitute for at least two years when they met. He says when she

His companions, a 17-year-old girl who worked as a prostitute for Carpita on one occasion and a 19-year-old who was familiar with his business, were left behind. A Missoula sheriff's deputy arrived and questioned the teens while Carpita hid behind the gas station in a stand of pines.

A few hours later, Carpita walked to a nearby carwash, where he thought the girls might be waiting, and was arrested. Sheriff's deputies "took me into the interrogation room," he says. "And they

18). He was taken into custody without incident.

Carpita pled guilty to the charges. On February 15, 2011, District Court Judge Karen Townsend sentenced him to 20 years in Montana State Prison with 10 of those suspended. Because of his willingness to cooperate and his lesser role in the ring, Anthony Brazington, who also pled guilty, received 10 years with six suspended. At sentencing, Carpita's lawyer told the court that her client was just trying "to fund a little endless summer."

Today, in a visiting room at the Montana State Prison, in Deer Lodge, Carpita recounts the events in Lolo that led to his arrest with a matter-of-fact tone intermittently stung with regret. When he describes the beer hitting the floor in the Lolo Town Pump, he makes a *pink* sound, like a guitar string snapping.

'THEY DID A LOT MORE.'

"We know prostitution exists in our town," says Missoula County prosecutor Jason Marks, "but it's rarely reported. In my research, I found one other case, from the '80s."

Among the Missoula locales where clients met with Carpita's and Brazington's prostitutes between March and June of 2010 are the Aspen Motel, the Redwood Lodge, the Shopko parking lot, the Good Food Store parking lot, Cross Roads Truck Plaza, Eastgate Albertson's parking lot, Sherwood Street, Blue Mountain, Fort Missoula, and a multi-colored Volkswagen van with

Three months later, on September 9, Carpita received a federal student aid check for \$5,000. School had just started, and since his arrest in Lolo, he'd stopped posting Craigslist ads for the girls, he says. So the check was a welcome respite from a dried-up cash flow. Though Carpita says he had an inkling that an investigation was underway, he had no idea it was about to end.

Carpita had used Craigslist before, when working as a heavy machinery operator before he moved to Montana in 2006. North Carolina, Rhode Island, Washington, California, Minnesota—Carpita's employer sent his crew around the country to maintain sections of railroad. He would land in a city and post an ad saying he was new in town and wondering if any women wanted to show him around. He says he met "lots of women" that way, adding, "I mean, you got to have skills, you can't just be some chump." He says no money was exchanged.

Carpita had just begun taking classes at the University of Montana, studying psychology. He says he came home from school one day to find Brazington had posted an ad for the girl. "He just showed me his phone and I could see there were, like, 50 messages from his

arrived in East Missoula, she was pimped out by her mother at the Aspen Motel. He says she approached him about working for his Craigslist operation. In mid-March, the second girl did her first job for Carpita, again at the Aspen Motel.

From there, business boomed, and by April, Carpita was looking for new girls to help him expand. Several refused before he met a willing Helen Smart.

IN THE PINES

On May 28, 2010, Carpita hung a six-pack of 16-ounce PBR cans over the waistband of his pants and slunk toward the door of the Lolo Town Pump. He didn't notice as a can stretched from its plastic ring. Then it fell to the floor, and he ran.

were like, 'We're not even going for the beer. We know about everything, so just tell us.'"

Carpita confessed to nothing. He was released in the morning.

Three months later, on September 9, Carpita received a federal student aid check for \$5,000. School had just started, and since his arrest in Lolo, he'd stopped posting Craigslist ads for the girls, he says. So the check was a welcome respite from a dried-up cash flow. Though Carpita says he had an inkling that an investigation was underway, he had no idea it was about to end.

At 10:30 that night, Carpita was arrested by sheriff's deputies in a 6th Street basement apartment and charged with promotion of prostitution and aggravated promotion of prostitution (aggravated because three of the four known prostitutes were under the age of

"Phish" spray-painted on the side. In addition, Carpita and Brazington took girls to work in Lolo, Frenchtown, Kalispell, Whitefish and Helena. It's also been alleged that Brazington took at least two of the girls to work in Washington State, though federal charges have not been filed.

Although the ends are hardly new, the Craigslist prostitution case represents a means never before seen in Missoula. "The internet has taken these girls off the street and made everything anonymous," says Missoula sheriff's detective T.J. McDermott. "The best evidence we had were [Carpita and Brazington's] cell phones, which had hundreds of text message correspondences, of which only a few were incriminating enough to press charges."

McDermott was talking about charging clients.

The 12 convicted johns in the Carpita-Brazington case range in age from 21 to 53, with a mean age of 36. Among the convicted were a North Side mechanic, a former manager of the now-closed Finnegan's Family Restaurant, a clerk at Noon's, and a Higgins Avenue-based attorney. The typical sentence ranged from a fine of \$340 to \$500, with a six-month suspended jail term.

Marks, the prosecutor, believes there are more johns who will never be convicted: "We charged 12 guys, and those were the ones we had enough evidence on, meaning we could identify who they were," he says, adding that he believes Carpita and Brazington "did a lot more."

In an interview with a detective from the Missoula Police Department, one of the young prostitutes estimates she worked for Carpita 70 to 80 times and for Brazington about 30 times. In the interview she describes johns who do not fit descriptions of men who were charged, including a Linda Vista resident whom she referred as "the Griz Guy"; she suspected he was a University of Montana football coach, though detectives did not corroborate this.

Asked if prostitution is still promoted in Missoula on Craigslist, Marks and McDermott say that's likely. Carpita is more confident, saying, "Absolutely...There are a lot of men out there who have money and are willing to pay for sex."

"I just don't think people realize this kind of stuff happens in Missoula," Helen Smart says. "But it does."

Born in 1992, Smart was the oldest of the four girls who worked for Carpita and Brazington. The youngest was born in 1994. During testimony, all of the johns said the girls represented themselves to be in their early twenties. Carpita admits he knew they were young, but, he adds, "They weren't little kids."

In interviews with law enforcement, all the girls said they worked of their own free will. Smart says she was living a "hollow existence" when Carpita propositioned her the night in the trailer in East Missoula. "For a long time my role had been party-ing," she says. "It was intriguing."

After prosecuting the johns and pimps, Marks says the court was mainly concerned with finding help for the girls. "They are considered victims, even though no one put a gun to their head," he says. "With adults, there's a very clear punishment aspect, but with kids, our primary goal has to be to find them help—though I'm not sure that we did." The court made St. Patrick Hospital's First STEP Resource Center available to the girls. Marks doesn't think any of them took advantage of the services.

Smart was the final girl who agreed to work for Carpita and Brazington. She estimates she did about a dozen jobs, roughly five of them with the same North Side client, who paid her \$150 to both



Photo by Chad Harder

give and receive oral sex. Of all the men she met with, she says, he was the only one who made her feel in danger: "I was his possession. I was worried he might never let me go."

'THE ATOMIC BOMB'

Smart says she was once a "social butterfly" whom "everyone called to find out where the party is." Today, she has trouble leaving her home. She avoids crowded places and dreads simple errands like grocery shopping. "I just feel like everybody is looking at me," she says—"like they all know who I am. It feels like I'm walking around naked."

The month Smart started high school, a local paper ran a story about her school's efforts to help incoming freshmen adjust to high school life. When the reporter asked Smart if she thought the school's efforts were helpful, she replied, "I hope so. I don't want to be all by myself. It's just scary...I didn't even realize that many kids lived in this town. I'm very intimidated but I'm very glad I'm here."

A year after her last job as a prostitute, Smart sits on a loveseat in her mostly empty apartment in south Missoula and tries to recall how it all happened. She says she doesn't have regrets, and that she's learned a lot from her mistakes,

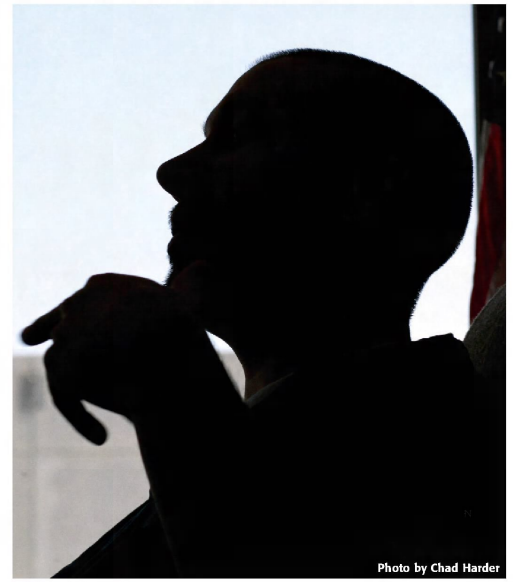
including the "atomic bomb" that fell on her last year. Now, she says, she's found peace and a reason to do better: She recently became a mother. Though her pregnancy wasn't planned, she's sure that the father is a man for whom she cares deeply and not one of the men who paid her for sex in 2010. Asked what she's learned since Missoula's Craigslist prostitution ring was busted, her answer comes quickly: "I can honestly say [my son] saved me."

Throughout the interview, Smart seems articulate, thoughtful, and self-aware in ways that belie her 19 years. She exudes a sort of micro-omniscience, as if she somehow had extra time to think about every question. Every question, that is, save for one: Asked what scares her most, her eyes widen and she appears surprised by a sudden upwelling of feeling. She lifts a hand from her infant son's chest to wipe her eyes.

"I'm scared that I'm going to end up alone," she says. "It's kind of scary realizing too that I'm going to have to start all over again."

Then she seems to collect herself. She returns a hand to her son and paves the trembling in her voice. "That's the bright side, though. No one will know me." ¶

editor@missoulanews.com



Richard Carpita

Photo by Chad Harder

the dish

Serving Homemade Breakfast & Lunch

Join us for a going away party for ERIN SNYDER, our talented Barista Thursday, 8/18, 4-6pm!

- Now serving local beer & regional wine!
- Eat in or take out
- Espresso and pastries
- Groceries
- Fresh, local, and friendly
- Variety of local meats
- To go picnic fare
- Located in the heart of the University District

the Buttercup Market and Cafe
541-1221

1221 HELEN AVENUE
ONE BLOCK WEST OF THE UNIVERSITY OF MONTANA
BETWEEN McLEOD & UNIVERSITY AVENUE

UPTOWN Diner

OPEN LATE
THURSDAY TILL FRIDAY SATURDAY 8PM

DOWNTOWN MISSOULA
120 N. Higgins
Open Sun-Wed 8-3pm,
Thurs-Sat 8-8pm • 542-2449

The Pearl Cafe
COUNTRY FARE WITH A CITY FLAIR

"We enjoy the Pearl and find it equal to, or better than, top-quality restaurants in Baltimore, San Francisco, Palm Springs, etc."

~ S. & V.

231 E Front St
541.0231 pearlcafe.us

SUSHITANA
downtown

Sushi Bar & Japanese Bistro

NOT JUST SUSHI Menu Has Changed!
More Sushi, More Sushi, More Sushi
Join us for Monday \$1 night
and try our expanded Sushi menu!

403 North Higgins Ave • 406.549.7979 www.sushihanamissoula.com

COMMON GROUND FARM • Arlee, MT

U-PICK

ORGANIC RASPBERRIES

\$20 for all you can pick
\$3 lb for small quantities
BRING YOUR OWN CONTAINER
OPEN 7 DAYS A WEEK
SUNRISE TO SUNSET

PARK AT HEART VIEW CENTER
31940 JOCKO RD
upickberries.blogspot.com or
726-2030 FOR MORE INFO
(PLEASE NO PETS IN BERRY PATCH)

*Certified by the Montana Department of Agriculture Organic Certification Program