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My life with the sugar daddies

Rich men queued up to date Helen Croydon. But at what point did accepting their generosity turn her from a date into something else altogether?

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I had always had a thing for older guys — it was about their

Helen Croydon accepted holidays, trips to Prada and finally cash (Martin Gardner)

maturity, finesse, assuredness, wisdom. Aged 29, I was fresh out of a stifling three-year relationship and looking for excitement, not love. I wanted to be wined, dined and seduced in a hotel suite. Then I wanted to repeat it a fortnight later, without the obligatory texts and exchanging of life stories in between. I wanted to meet someone who knew where to go for dinner, someone who had achieved something in life. I was working as a multimedia broadcast journalist and felt frustrated, hankering to get into real TV, but first I wanted to make the most of my gloriously commitment-free lifestyle.

I discovered a few websites for successful older men after younger women. I joined

Sugardaddie.com, which looked like the largest, adopting the profile name Perrier-Jouët. With a database of men at my fingertips, I could search by their age, the colour of their eyes and even their salary. I soon discovered that my relaxed ideal of an emotionally low-maintenance relationship was highly regarded by time-poor, cash-rich gentlemen, so much so that they were willing to pay, in many different ways.

My first consummated date was a 47-year-old sports-events organiser who drove me in his vintage Chevy to his four-bedroom bachelor pad. Of course I fancied him — I wouldn't have stayed the night if I didn't. I felt reassured by his boldness; he wasn't embarrassed about being hungry for me, unlike inexperienced men who would so often ruin an erotic moment by pausing for verbal confirmation. He could perform. While chatting, he opened my eyes to the fact that some girls do this for money — he mentioned one who asked for £1,500 a month.

The huge number of responses made me feel like a sex goddess. One day, I had three offers to be whisked away to Florida, the Côte d'Azur and someone's boat in Marbella. Soon, I was being taken to Michelin-starred restaurants and five-star hotels by international businessmen. I was offered champagne and cocaine, and it wasn't long before I had an overt cash offer. "I assure you I am genuine SD," wrote one in stilted English, "and to prove it I will give you £500. I promise I will not expect any more than dinner this first time." His photo looked attractive, although when I met him, it was clear it was 10 years out of date. Before the first course, he handed me a brown envelope. I wasn't sure whether I should gush with delight or just put it in my bag with a nod. After the meal, I warily expected him to want more, but he simply said: "Well, er, I 'ad better call you zee taxee." I never heard from him again.

I soon realised that offers like that weren't uncommon. Some sugar daddies wanted to get the competitive edge by offering gifts or promising shopping trips. Others alluded to direct financial assistance, for example: "Happy to help with finances/education fees, etc." Usually they were married or much older men — 60-plus.

Any man who opens a dialogue with an invitation to join him in a mutually foreign city — here, New York — must be either desperate, dangerous or a fantasist, I thought. But Greg, a Canadian, was persistent. I'm not sure when the exact "f***-it" moment came, but, charmed by his eloquence, I suddenly found myself discussing e-tickets.

Flying first class is amazing, I thought as I sipped Pommery champagne. Greg was more attractive than his photo, but it was strange meeting someone knowing we would be sharing a hotel bed for the next two days. It didn't make me feel nervous, though. While walking around Manhattan, he asked: "Are you ready for a day of shopping? We have to go into Prada, if only to see the architecture." Once inside, the staff were thronging around me, presenting champagne. I felt so important, like I had the power to get what I wanted. That day he paid for seven Prada pieces, some Louboutins, a matching bag, a pair of Seven jeans, a swimsuit and a dress. I was now involved in some sort of sexual trade-off. We had sex, but only because the script dictated it. I felt connected to Greg, so I couldn't see a reason not to.

I established a couple of continuous but casual relationships with sugar daddies — good-looking, well-turned-out men, intelligent and interesting conversationalists who provided that edge of glamour with exquisite restaurants and top hotels. They were excitingly naughty — one in a drugs-and-sex-binge way, another in a may-go-to-prison-for-fraud way. Once a sugar daddy met me with an exotic-looking brunette. "I thought we could have a little fun," he said. I'd previously told him my fantasy to try a threesome, and he'd taken that as a cue for the evening's setup.

I can't begin to count the number of dates I had over those next few months. Most were one-evening wonders, offering nothing more than stimulating dinner conversation. Others were one-night horrors: idiots obsessed with their own wealth; patronising men attracted to younger women with no savoir-faire; married men who hid that fact until the date; men in restaurants they couldn't afford; a sixtysomething who wanted a girl who'd swing with him (I wouldn't). I met lonely men longing for love. I met gullible men who had fallen victim to the financial demands of

sugar babes. (One girl, MissPenelope, messaged me saying she knew a better site where girls could get “10,000 a month”.) Thankfully, only a few men repulsed me and none of them scared me.

Eventually, the dates began to lose their appeal. Powerful men started to seem normal or, worse, arrogant and detached. I chose not to renew my membership. My girlfriend, who had always had her misgivings, approved, saying: “You’re in danger of losing touch with the real world. You wouldn’t even notice if a guy saved up to treat you.”

I had met so many colourful characters with exciting jet-set lives that “normal men” felt like a step back. Appalled with myself for begrudging going Dutch, I tried to detox from men altogether, but I soon got bored. A couple of weekends later, I read an article about a businessman being caught out with some high-class escorts. Apparently, he had met the girls on Seeking-Arrangement.com. The name suggested it was based on the pay-as-you-go relationship.

I logged on. Given that my penchant for older men hadn’t changed, and I wanted only a limited level of interaction, I concluded I might as well date someone prepared to pay. I used to be disgusted by men who offered shopping trips or a monthly allowance, but now it seemed logical.

I didn’t get anywhere near as many messages on this website, and the men were more businesslike: “What are you after exactly?” They often demanded at least five photos before considering a meeting. With 10 times as many women as men on the site, the men are inundated. It doesn’t sound at all pleasant, but I was turned on by high-flying, powerful men willing to compensate me simply for being their date. This, I suppose, was my next high.

I arranged to meet a Malaysian guy and liked him instantly. He seemed genuine and fun, and I felt I could truly be myself. At J Sheekey, the seafood restaurant, he ventured: “Maybe we can start with some sort of compensation just for the times when we meet?” That sounds like something we could try, I responded. “If we fall in love, then we will reassess,” he said. “I’m not really the falling-in-love type,” I said dismissively.

A few days later he asked to see me again. While sex had been of low importance in our arrangement, he was needy, always wanting to talk and see me. How ironic, I thought: he pays because he doesn’t want any emotional investment, but now he’s demanding emotional support from me.

Then I met a hotshot lawyer who agreed to pay me with loaded



Playboy boss Hugh Hefner and his 24-year-old fiancée Crystal Harris (Matt Sayles)

Selfridges gift cards. In return, he wanted two to three meetings a month with overnight stays at his football pitch-sized pad on the Strand. He wanted exclusivity (not the norm) and to go on trips. A holiday to Val d'Isère was trying, despite a beautiful chalet. His anally retentive ways were infuriating, and he didn't know how to acknowledge his emotions. That was probably why he viewed intimacy as a commodity. At night, he would cling on to me. Physical neediness seems common in high-powered men. Once naked, they begged not for sex, but for affection and acceptance.

As the Selfridges cards started to stack up, I soon twigged that my new secondary income would go further on the high street. I told him that if he didn't mind, I would prefer cash. When I was made redundant, the lawyer and the Malaysian sugar daddy put in aggressive claims for my time. Now that I might have to depend on being a paid paramour, I felt obliged to accept the holidays. In Aspen with the lawyer, our differences manifested themselves constantly, and my rage spilled over: "Is this why you've flown me out here? Someone to humiliate for your own intellectual satisfaction? Is that why you can't connect with women?" He just stared back in silence.

From Colorado, I went straight to Kuala Lumpur to see the Malaysian. "You can stay here for as long as you like," he said. "You don't have to pay for anything." When we had sex, we lacked the affection of lovers, and we slept in separate rooms — we were both relieved to have that distance. We travelled to a luxurious island resort and couldn't sit still without someone offering us water, a clean towel or a parasol. We discussed the morality of prostitution, with him asking whether all women are inherently prostitutes.

"Most people only do something if they can see some sort of reward," I responded. "Think of people in stale marriages. They stay for financial stability or a secure home life." For a moment I thought prostitution would be easier money than four days in a chalet with a man who drove me insane. On my last evening, my Malaysian sugar daddy handed me an envelope full of £50 notes. On the front, he'd written, "With love".

In London, I hooked up with my other sugar daddies, the only hook now being money. Soon, the Malaysian sugar daddy returned. He was visiting friends, he said, but later confessed to wanting to see me. By now we had become close enough for me to feel awkward receiving payment, but he

would call continuously, and there was a huge disparity in how we saw our relationship. Eventually, I blurted out: “You want too much from me.”

A chain of events conspired to stop me dating for money. There was the jolting realisation of my fear of attachment, my lack of interest in sex for the sake of it, and the fact that I was lying so much to everyone that it was hard to know who was the real me. I couldn’t date sugar daddies for ever.

Then I met Richard. He was in London from Los Angeles for a Sotheby’s auction and staying at the Dorchester — my second favourite hotel after Claridge’s. He was 42 and looked like a younger Tom Cruise. My first thought was, what does a guy like you need to do this for? After two wonderful days together, he observed: “You put this pressure on yourself, don’t you?”

It all clicked into place. These men had validated the quality of my company with Prada, lingerie, first-class airline tickets, expensive restaurants and hard cash, so I felt I always had to be at my best. No wonder I was afraid of them intruding into my intimate world. Aged 32, I stopped taking money, not because I changed my view on whether it was right or wrong, but because I changed my view about what I wanted. Money and a fast lifestyle are no remedy for a lack of fulfilment.

Wealthy man, willing girl, how it works

“Daddy” always pays.

There’s a double standard around looks: the men rarely post photos on the websites, but women are expected to.

There are double standards around etiquette, too — a sugar daddy can cancel, but a sugar babe should not keep her date waiting.

Keep your distance. Neither party ever asks their date’s surname, they never “phone for a chat”, and the man never stays at his date’s home.

Don’t expect the world. Some sugar daddies presume the woman is happy with a glamorous date alone.

“Help with college fees or rent” is a euphemism for a cash allowance.

Suggesting “meeting for a coffee” is a way for a sugar daddy to check if he likes someone before investing in dinner.

Invest that allowance. A long-term boyfriend is cool with tracky bums and scrubbed face; a sugar daddy is paying for presentation — manis, pedis, blow-drys, waxing and hot outfits.

Flick on the charm switch. It’s not only about sex, you know — they also want sparkling company.

What motivates a sugar daddy?

“A young girl is the ultimate trophy for a man,” explained one sugar daddy over a glass of Veuve Delaroy up Tower 42. “She’s a beautiful, pure creature. Plump skin, innocent eyes, firm body.” She might not have the wisdom and strength of character of a mature woman, he acknowledged, but mature women “have lost their looks”. Other sugar daddies admitted that spending a lot of money on me worked up their self-esteem. Some said they wanted to find love again, but found it hard. “I know at my age I can’t expect someone of your age to be with me,” said one, adding that there weren’t many single women of his age around. “This site gives me the next best thing to love — it is full of beautiful girls.”

Many sugar daddies are international businessmen who don’t have the luxury of time to spend getting to know a girl, but they say they miss the intimacy and that it’s hard for them to commit when they travel all the time. I found that a financial investment was often a substitute for an emotional one. Powerful men wanted the rewards of a devoted girlfriend, but also the freedom of a bachelor lifestyle, so they’d opt for paying cash over earache.

However, a sugar babe is different to an escort, as one sugar daddy pointed out to me. “If you spend two hours with an escort, it’s expensive” — one escort’s daily rate was £5,000 — and, he said, “You are left with an empty feeling afterwards. I want someone I can have sex with, but I want to enjoy spending time with them, too.”

Sugar Daddy Diaries: When a Fantasy Became an Obsession by Helen Croydon is published on March 3 (Mainstream Publishing £7.99). To buy it for £7.59 (inc p&p), call 0845 271 2135 or go to thesundaytimes.co.uk/bookshop