

THE GEESE THAT LAY THE GOLDEN EGGS

*Romance Scams that break hearts
and plunder wallets*



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The Geese That Lay The Golden Eggs

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Translated by Linda Thody

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The geese that lay the golden eggs
For the women who know how to take care of themselves
and those who sooner or later will learn how to do so
Romance scams that break hearts
and plunder wallets

These are true stories. To respect the protagonists' privacy, in some cases their names have been changed.

The title 'The geese that lay the golden eggs' was chosen to emphasise the disdain with which scammers manipulate women's feelings to exploit them to their own advantage.

The contents of this book do not claim to be therapeutic but are intended to make women face up to a cruel reality of our times, and through the telling of stories and the dissemination of every possible means of defence, help them protect their hearts, hold on to their wallets and regain their self-esteem.

Romance Scams Online contacts

No offence, but itâ##s happened to us all, poor lonely women caught out by an online message which weâ##ve fallen for, some perhaps more than others. With our heart beating madly for that oh so handsome, charming, passionate man whoâ##s noticed us, fascinated by our face in a photograph; won over by our story, or by the few personal details that the more reserved of us have only hinted at on our Facebook, twitter or other social network profile.

We canâ##t help it! Us women are romantic, and "friendlyâ## to the point of absurdity. Friendly and willing to believe that finally cupid has smiled down upon us, noticed our most intimate desires for love and let fly his arrow.

It seems like a wonderful sign of fate that such a remarkable man is interested in us, a man in naval or military uniform. With an honest gaze, open smile, profound dark eyes or even light ones, it doesnâ##t matter. When we fall in love even the colour of the eyes is changeable, it matches the ideal image we carry around inside us. Remember Proust and the colour of the little Gilberte Swannâ##s eyes, who he meets as a child? He describes them of such a brilliant black as to give back a bright blue light, so that if the little girl had not had such dark eyes - writes Proust - he would not have been in love most particularly with her blue eyes.

Itâ##s the meeting of desire and true likeness that fits our ideal image. The two pieces of a puzzle. What a coincidence! What luck, we think from that first contact with a few polite phrases from the fake American soldier. Heâ##s even the right age for us! Somewhere between fifty and sixty, like so many lonely separated women, or widows, or divorcees, who before this lucky meeting had tried all the *Meetics*, *dating sites*, *Badoos*, where nothing ever came of anything, perhaps because of our aversion to the person who said he was 25 years younger than his real age, or the irremediable faults which led to separations from exes: wives, lovers, girlfriends. When my sister-in-law once asked me why I hadnâ##t rebuilt my life with a new companion, I told her itâ##s difficult finding the right person, because as we get older we become more demanding; we do not easily surrender our independence, and the men who approach us have already been left by their woman, probably because theyâ##re flawed.

â##Flawed?â## replied my sister-in-law and she began laughing out loud repeating â##Ah, flawed, flawed... what a description!â##

But the same can be said of us too, whatâ##s that got to do with it? On dating sites, we too describe ourselves in our *Meetic* profile, posting a photo on the net that was taken a few years after our first communion. Then we go to meet the poor guy in the hope that he wonâ##t notice that the person before him looks like the grandmother of the beautiful girl in the photograph. So, what happens in these cases? The more courteous offer a coffee and say goodbye. The others ask you straight out to your face, "Why are you hiding your age? You canâ##t be forty! You must be at least twenty years older!â##

â##Well what about you? Youâ##re supposedly only 55?" we might reply and get a brazenly optimistic response. â##Iâ##m sixty-four, but I look young for my age!â##

Faced with such vanity, what should we do? I think itâ##s best to just forget about it. Or, out of pure revenge, we could recommend that our friend should at least buy a mirror to furnish his home.

How many Friday night encounters end with an argument, or perhaps a bad-mannered comment from a guy who seems aristocratic enough online, but then turns out to be more accustomed to the sort of company found down at the docks, not setting sail, but loading and unloading.

But letâ##s not be dramatic. Is the boor of the momentâ##s language distasteful? Then each of you better go their separate ways. At worst we can just ban him and put the whole story to bed!

Bluffing never pays. Not even a pizza together to make friends is allowed, when you meet on misleading premises. These are the risks of social networking. Moderate risks overall, until recently anyway: a bad impression, a disappointment, a missed invitation to dinner. Nothing more serious.

Romance scams

Nothing like the new trend of online virtual meetings between romantic ladies and lowlifes who set out to deceive mature women, with the single-minded ambition of getting their hands on the little, or large as it may be, nest egg which they imagine a person close to retirement will have set aside. They know all about the leaving bonus carefully hidden away in a safety deposit box, or perhaps even at home behind a tile? They know everything about us! And these *sonnavabitches* are clever. They use sophisticated techniques as if they really were the gentlemen they claim to be. They pull apart all our plans to defend ourselves against the "bad" guys, as though they were little Lego bricks, because they're different, different to that loser of our neighbour's ex-husband who woos us. Their (virtual) strong points are the appeal of a uniform, a distinguished profession, their status as a single man without ties, the adventure of it all, the courage involved, their financial resources. Because after all, we can all do the maths and perhaps even go online to see how much an American naval officer earns, or an Australian airman, or an English captain on ocean-going ships.

But we let our hearts rule our heads and as unsuspecting, romantic, dreamy women we don't realise that they're really very different to us. They're not westerners but they do everything to seem as if they are. They learn how to act to turn a woman's head. They watch lots of films, read romantic novels, and textbooks on how to conquer a woman. They pick up phrases, pleasantries, similes, which win the hearts of middle-aged women, even careful and intelligent ones. In fact, according to a statistical study, it seems the intelligence factor is always at a high level in these scammed women¹. Ghanaians, Nigerians or Malaysians, no matter where they're from, the scammers use every tool the globalised world offers them to get to know the psychology, the dreams, the way of thinking of a western woman. Moreover, it's by no means rare that the handsome man writing to us from the other side of the world is really another woman. Probably younger than us, but most definitely cunning and skilful. A professional organiser of *Romance Scams*, the sophisticated and lucrative love-affair scams.

Some stories of women scammed on the web

An example of some of the phrases copied and pasted when contacting women online:

«I miss you so much, you're necessary for my heart and soul. You're my day, my night, my moon, my sun. You're the one and only queen of my heart. I really miss you, my days are getting sadder and sadder».

Melania

What does a still young and attractive woman from Rimini lack, to persuade her, in a delusion of love, to transfer payments for 24 thousand euros into a stranger's account?

Melania² is 40 years old, she lives in one of Italy's most 'open-minded' cities, the most famous holiday resort in Europe; culturally vibrant, visited by tourists, conference participants, businessmen, artists of all kinds and ages. Does Rimini perhaps lack opportunities? I wouldn't think so. Yet Melania finds her romantic love on the web; but it's a romance scam, a cybernetic mess that impoverishes her resources and quickly becomes a thorn in her heart that will torment her for a long time.

When Melania reads the online message from John, a soldier in the U.S. Army, she doesn't wonder how come the man in uniform has contacted precisely her. No, she thinks 'The power of Facebook! How could I ever meet a man like this if I weren't on the net?'

Melania is not naive and clueless, she's forty, she has a degree in biology, works for a public institution, has a former husband who she left out of boredom and incompatibility of character.

«I saw your photo - John writes to her - and for two days I've been waking up at night with your face before my eyes. I like what you say in your profile. I think you're a fascinating woman. May I ask you to be friends?»

«Why not - Melania thinks - a polite manner of introducing himself in a man with good qualities is always welcome.»

The friendship begins with the exchange of messages, first daily, then hourly: morning, afternoon, evening.

«I'm a soldier in the *United States Army* and I've been stationed in Afghanistan for many years now.» John tells her about his days, the dangers he lives through, his regrets for one day having had to divorce his wife who betrayed him (the cheat). His dreams of having a traditional family, a loving wife with whom to plan a future. A life together full of love, passion, values, respect. As well as travel and fun.

Strangely enough, John asks very little about her. He seems not to care who Melania really is, how she lives, what she believes in, what religion she practices. In this, the American is very open-minded. And, if at first Melania is a little surprised, she soon gets used to it. An outsider would have immediately understood that (the so-called) John couldn't give a damn about Melania, but she doesn't. She starts to be dazzled by his phrases and to justify his obvious indifference as open-mindedness. After all, you can't expect the narrow-mindedness of an Italian lover from an American man, a soldier who has travelled the world.

Melania, on the other hand, takes great interest in him, what he tells her, the words he writes to her:

«*Darling, it's getting harder and harder to get to sleep at night, in the darkness of my room, without you beside me, without holding you close to my heart. Without seeing your marvellous eyes half-close with the pleasure of my caresses on your soft skin, kissing you to bring you happiness and ecstasy. The happiness that only two soul mates feel when fate brings them together.*»

«What are you doing? Dear John, how do you spend your days? - asks Melania. - What do you want from a woman to make you happy?», and in the following message he replies: «I want a woman like you! Oh, Melania, marvellous creature, where have you been all this time? Why didn't you bring me happiness before now? Where were the scents of your skin? your body, your womb, the colours of Eden that I see in your eyes. Where was your mouth that I dream of kissing all the time? When will I be happy and satisfied? I can't wait any longer. May I call you darling? Don't tell me I'm moving too fast! I've never suffered and been so happy because of a woman like this

before. I suffer because you're so far away, I'm happy because you're in my life now and anyway I feel you close to me. You're inside me. We are one!».

See how much passion John the soldier manages to convey?

Completely smitten, Melania increasingly lowers her defences and her objective judgement criteria. She cares very little now about her job, her friends, her hobbies. John's messages, John's promises, the prospects of a happy life together, lead her to imagine intense days filled with new things, happiness, travel to the USA to meet his family, and why not, to join him in Afghanistan.

She starts to fantasise like a teenager about to experience her first love. She plans their meeting and eliminates any obstacles to her happiness before they even appear. She could go and join him in Afghanistan, she could ask for some time off work.

The public authority where she works allows this sort of leave. She can already see herself dressed in camouflage fatigues, crossing inaccessible desert areas, in a white Land Rover. She starts to read up about it, she buys books, including *Viaggio a Kabul* [Journey to Kabul]³, where a whole new world starts to appear before her: *the snow-capped mountains of Hindukush, the cobalt blue of the sky, the ochre colour of the ancient abandoned cities along the Silk Route, and the noise, the myriad colours of Kabul.* And with all of this, her fantastic soldier, John.

What can her phoney lover ask her for, at this point? Probably anything....

The facts teach us that Melania agrees to all his requests. Her involvement is so all-encompassing that not even a hint of a possible scam would awaken her from his spell. She is in the (virtual) hands of John, who asks her to pay with (real) money for the dream he has given her.

«I gave you what you wanted!» he'll tell her later, when he's found out.

But let's see how the story continues

While she plans her trip to Kabul, he begins to devise a tour of his own around Italy. Get to know Rimini, go to the sea together; see Rome and Venice while they're on their honeymoon full of happiness.

Melania changes her plans for exotic excursions shifting them towards cultural explorations in the Vatican museums and romantic getaways in the narrow streets of Venice. What does it matter! America and Asia can wait, the important thing is to have her beloved John at her side!

The fact is that the American is becoming very keen to travel to Italy and live there, to start a new life in the *Bel Paese* with his beloved Melania; to be together, love each other, be happy, and start a family. He is so involved in this perspective of life together as a couple that the next step becomes decisive: leave the American army. Resign, leave permanently.

«But are you sure? - she asks - The choice you're making is forever. Won't you regret it?»

Melanie is a little worried, but very flattered by the fact that a man like him would completely change all his life plans for her.

«Regret it?» says John. «Regret wanting a life with an adorable woman in a wonderful country like Italy? I'd regret it bitterly, a thousand times over, if I didn't take this step. Straight away, now. And I'm tired, fed up of the dry land where my military boots tread. I'm tired of war and blood!

I want to see blue skies, Italy's turquoise sea, your hazel eyes with specks of gold, Melania my love!».

The request for money

At this point, all of you reading this, would have woken up from the daydream if John had asked you for money, right? Melanie doesn't wake up; but let's look at their chat exchange:

«I've applied for discharge. They've told me they'll accept my application but with certain conditions.»

«What conditions?»

«They want me to pay something. A sort of penalty.»

«How much?»

«The equivalent of 24 thousand euros in dollars.»

«Well, you've got it, haven't you?»

«I've invested in securities in the United States, it's money that is tied-up. I haven't got the amount they want, here.»

Melania is upset by this request. It's not decorous for a man to ask his woman for money. She's not used to it, because although she can remember many shortcomings of her former husband, he always provided for his family.

She never lacked anything while she lived with her first husband.

A little alarm bell rings faintly in her brain, but her heart overrides the doubts that are surfacing. Because he's also clever at brushing them aside.

«I don't know if I'll be able to get that amount together.» Melania says, already starting to regret her caution because she has some money put aside, more than the amount John needs.

«Don't do it, my darling, if it's a problem. I feel rotten asking you to do this. It's not right. I have enough savings for both of us in my US accounts. It's the man who should always look after his woman! Forget what I said. We'll find another solution. I'll stay here a bit longer and we'll postpone meeting for a year until I'm discharged.»

«A year?». Melania is appalled at the prospect of waiting another year to be able to embrace John. No, she can't wait that long. Because he writes to her assiduously, intense words full of emotion. He tells her how much he loves her, how lonely he feels laying in his bed and hugging his cold pillow; every night he dreams of kissing her and making love to her, then in the morning waking up leaves his soul empty and sad.

So, Melania gives in. She dips into her savings and transfers some money by *Western Union*. John collects it and disappears. The great love affair ends overnight.

John doesn't really exist. The person writing to Melania is a 23-year-old Nigerian. He's part of a gang of crooks who split the loot between them after each romance scam⁴.

When Melania contacts the police, they tell her she is the third woman from Rimini to be scammed in a few months. But that's small consolation to her. As soon as she can she insults the so-called John (online again) and calls him a thief and a scammer. He answers that he gave her what she was looking for and suggests she join him in Nigeria to have some fun. Melania calls him an animal and ends all contact with him for ever.

No dream could finish in a worse manner. Poor Melania. She's upset about the money - yes - but even more about having fallen for a scam which, with hindsight, seems so obvious to her. «I really am stupid!» she tells herself every morning as she looks in the mirror.

She began treatment because she didn't know what else to do. She closed her Facebook profile. The psychologist told her to avoid the computer and start going for long bike rides again like she used to when she was young, to enrol in a club for environmentalists, artists or whatever she liked, to leave the virtual world alone and get out and meet real people.

Luciana

When Luciana reads the friend request on Facebook, intrigued she thinks «A Frenchman? He's not bad actually!»

The man immediately tells her he's a widower, like Luciana, and he makes a date to chat online with her the following evening.

She's a widow, he's a widower. They're the same age, both 50 with children. This is how their daily online meetings begin. A very pleasant date for the woman who becomes fond of Vincent (this is the name the self-styled French widower gives her).

According to Luciana's tale their date every evening becomes pleasantly unavoidable. The messages he writes are always very polite, he sends her kisses and little hearts, and he also sends a few photos with and without his children. Luciana does the same as she falls in love like a teenager.

«It felt like I was reliving the now forgotten feelings of my youth. He used to send me words of love that I'd never even read in books. In the end I was completely off my head, to the point that I was unable to tear myself away from my mobile or my computer»⁵.

Departure for Ivory Coast

Let's be clear in our minds that Ivory Coast, Senegal, Ghana, are almost always involved in any fake *love stories*, because these are the places where the swindlers live, and they need to have the money sent there. Our dear Vincent warns Luciana he is about to leave for Ivory Coast for his work as an art dealer. But this is wonderful news for her. Once he has finished his African trip to buy inlaid wooden masks, he will return to France, but not without first stopping off in Italy to embrace his beautiful lover from Rimini.

How exciting! The dream is coming true. Luciana starts to fantasize about their meeting at the airport. Her holding a notice on which she will have written **VINCENT** in big letters. Him, handsome and elegant, with his suitcase labelled Abidjan, and sunglasses; perhaps a small souvenir for her or her child.

Luciana can't wait, and she begins organising all the details of her welcome for Vincent. Shall I make a banner to put up in the hallway at home? Perhaps not, it's silly.

She doesn't want to seem too taken and treat him as if he were the only man on earth. Much better to think about more concrete things like a special dinner, with all her best dishes: saffron-flavoured lasagne, blueberry tart, a good Italian wine. Everything must be simple, but perfect, to welcome the man who is going to change the course of her life. Luciana can't wait to embrace him. She takes up going to the gym again, she lunches on salad and mozzarella. She wants to lose two or three kilos in the time she has left before she meets Vincent.

Luciana becomes more beautiful and her friends notice this. Her eyes sparkle as she tells her story, how lucky she has been to have met a special man on Facebook. A few of her friends speak of caution: «Be careful with social media! Things are not always what they seem!» But Luciana barely listens. She expected these warnings and doesn't take heed. Her happiness springs from having met the man of her life, and her friends' gossip will not ruin it for her.

But one day she receives bad news that dampens her contentment, that feeling of being lucky, privileged almost by fate. Vincent sends her a message from Ivory Coast asking her for help. He's desperate. His briefcase has been stolen and with it his wallet and credit card, his mobile phone and all the money he had with him. What's more, the thieves chased him by car and while he was trying to get away from them he ran over an 8-year old child who was seriously injured and is now in hospital. At this point, Vincent risks prison if he doesn't immediately pay 2500 euros for medical treatment.

The fog begins to clear in Luciana's mind

Many women would have paid, just as they pay in other *Romance Scams*, but Luciana starts hearing little alarm bells ringing, and she begins asking things, asking, asking: a photo of the run-over child, his name and details, the address and bank coordinates of the hospital where the money is to be transferred.

Vincent is a little offended by her mistrust. He tells her so. Then he patiently explains that the hospital does not accept bank transactions from Europe. The only way to pay is by *Money transfer*.

The fog clears in Luciana's brain and she emails the embassy in Abidjan asking for information about the self-styled Vincent, she provides his FACEBOOK profile, and little else. She discovers the man is an impostor who is known to the police because he is part of a gang specializing in romance scams.

The little alarm bells

Luciana starts adding all the information in her possession together. The alleged Vincent pretends he is French because Ivory Coast, a former colony, uses French as its official language. Heâ##s never left Abidjan and has pretended to go there, to be able to receive the cash payment in his homeland.

Luciana doesnâ##t send him the money and sheâ##s clever to realise, in time, that itâ##s a scam. The request for money sets off a little alarm bell inside her. Intuition and reason prevail over her emotions, and the scammer loses the match he has so laboriously played.

Any woman, anybody - when asked for money - should awake from their romantic obfuscation. The automatic reaction should be: Money = Wake up!

Then tell the unscrupulous looter to sod off. But itâ##s not easy to let go of the dream. Luciana cries for days on end, after reporting the scam. She says she felt completely stupid, an idiot:

«He used such psychological violence - Luciana explains during an interview - as to literally bring me to my knees. He even used to ask me if Iâ##d slept well, if Iâ##d eaten and if Iâ##d had a good day at work! Itâ##s obvious that if Iâ##d been thinking straight I would have understood that it was impossible that there was such a nice polite man who was going to fall in love with someone like me, neither beautiful, nor young; but unfortunately, as the saying goes, love is blind»⁶.

Mary

Mary's story is told by her son Lucien. A nasty story, but with a happy ending, if it can be called that when you get your own money back.

Mary has just turned 59 when she's contacted by an American sailor who wishes her a happy birthday and asks her to be friends. The man says his name is Michael Miller and he's 53.

She's been living in Italy for a decade. French by birth, she used to be married to an Italian journalist from whom she's divorced. She has a son Lucien, born of her marriage, who is a high school mathematics teacher and who lives in Rome, like his mother.

Michael's first contact happens on her birthday. He asks her to be friends, she accepts. He sends her (a photo of) an enormous bouquet of red roses with a happy birthday message in English.

«What did you do for your birthday?» Michael asks her the following day, in bad Italian.

«It was nice! I had dinner with my friends and we had a lovely evening.»

«Do you have a lot of friends? Who do you like? I'm jealous.»

«Do you speak French? - asks Mary - my English is not very good.»

«Avez vous beaucoup d'amis? Qui aimez-vous? je suis jaloux.» he repeats admitting he's translated the phrase on Google, then he continues the conversation with copy and paste from an online translator.

«Well if you're using Google just choose Italian - Mary urges him - because in French I feel like I want to correct all your mistakes.»

«Do you have many friends? Who do you like? I'm jealous.»

«Don't talk nonsense!»

«I can't stop thinking about you. I saw your photo a month ago, but I'm shy and I only found the courage to contact you with it being your birthday!»

«Really?» asks Mary flattered. «What did you find so attractive in me? I'm just a normal woman.»

«Normal? *Say normal is false.* Saying you're normal is just not true. You're beautiful.»

«How old did you say you are?»

«53, and you?»

«I'm 59, I'm older than you. Men always look for young girls. What attracts you to such a mature person?»

«Your photo shows me an elegant lady, *you're a beautiful woman.* Mary, you mustn't underestimate yourself Mary. Look at yourself with love's eyes, as I see you, and you'll see you're beautiful!»

«Love? You're going rather fast now!»

«Yes, I'm going fast, but I'm following my heart that's going even faster than me!»

A week after her birthday Mary has the sensation she's known Michael for a long time. He contacts her every day at the same time, and his requests to love her are increasingly persistent. He says nice things, and although his Italian is only approximate, he confesses to her that he's never felt such overwhelming feelings before. He's had other affairs, but nothing important, because he's always believed that to build a sincere relationship he had to find his soul mate. He believes that God has created an ideal lover for every being on earth, and he's lucky to have managed to find her and fulfil his dream.

To live together, get married and lay together one beside the other as a single body; this is human happiness. There's nothing more beautiful!

Mary is intoxicated by these words, by Michael's attentions, as he floods her with pictures of beautiful scenes at sunset, flowers, mostly red roses, with the phrase «Je t'aime» or «Je t'aime beaucoup» or alternatively «I love you.»

Strangely he doesn't send her any pictures of himself in other poses or moments of his daily life. Mary only has two pictures of Michael, one close-up and another full-length view. Both pictures show him in uniform and are of an attractive man, with a high forehead, a proud gaze and just a hint of a smile. Not much to fall in love with. However, Mary is so enraptured by his words, promises, allusions to perfect sentimental and sexual happiness, that she doesn't ask for more. To share the dream of a soul mate is what she wants too. She believes in it. She wants nothing else. Michael's words are a daily dose of pleasure, a spoken and virtual intuition that is the premise to their real-life meeting, which will happen very soon. Michael wants that, Mary wants it, especially after messages like this:

«Darling I miss you so much, you've become necessary for my soul, my heart. You're my day and night.

You're the sun and the moon to me. You're my queen. I miss you so much and the days separating me from you are much too long and cruel. Oh, how I would like to cut the ribbon of time which separates us from our first meeting! Love me Mary! Make me happy and never betray our dream!».

Finally, our meeting, but first Iâ€™m going to Abidjan!

Strange the coincidences in life, because Maryâ€™s story also has links with Ivory Coast. And quite by chance, Michael needs to go precisely to Abidjan to clinch a deal. He intends to leave the marines and plans to set up a diamond import-export business with his severance pay.

A million carats worth of diamonds a year are extracted in Ivory Coast. So, Michael, who is planning his future business and success, has an appointment with a manager from the mines who will suggest the right quantities of precious stones to export, the purchase prices and the sales prices on the European markets.

The forecast is for huge profits, so the Marine has ploughed all his savings into getting together the sum to be paid in advance to start his export business to Europe. He has a lot of money set aside because he earns more than eight thousand dollars a month. Then heâ€™ll pay the manager of the mines the contractual balance with his military service severance pay.

Mind you! The most exciting part of the plan, as told by Michael, is that heâ€™ll start his journey towards Europe with Italy, Rome, where heâ€™ll stop off to embrace Mary, and plan their future together; to crown their dream of a happy union and looking ahead - why not - even get married.

After another week of online chat, with Michaelâ€™s usual loving attentions, the anticipated time of departure for the Ivory Coast comes around.

He calls her as soon as he gets to Abidjan and tells her heâ€™s had a good journey. Theyâ€™ll talk again online the following day.

Instead three long days go by with no sign of Michael. Mary starts to worry, she doesnâ€™t know what to put this silence down to. Sheâ€™s anxious. Then she finally receives a call from Ivory Coast. The person contacting her is a doctor in a clinic who tells her that Michael is seriously ill. He was taken to hospital after being attacked by three criminals. Heâ€™s having an operation on his spleen. It was Michael himself who begged the doctor to contact her, because before going under the knife (heâ€™s very seriously injured the poor man) he thought about Mary knowing sheâ€™d be worried and asked them (we imagine in a faint whisper) to contact his woman.

The doctor talks at length to Mary (almost as though he hasnâ€™t got much else to do) and ends the telephone call by informing her that the following day Michael himself will probably be able to call her.

Worried out of her mind Mary sends him messages, without any result. Then the following day she sees a photo of him, sent to her smartphone. His face is swollen, it looks painful. The operation has gone well he explains, speaking softly and painfully. Theyâ€™ve removed his spleen. He must rest until he recovers.

He tells her that his attackers stole 90 thousand dollars off him. He has nothing now until heâ€™s paid his severance money. He hasnâ€™t even got the money to pay the clinic. Whatâ€™s more heâ€™s signed the contract with the manager of the mines and he must cover the cheque he paid as a guarantee. He wouldnâ€™t want to ask her for help for anything in the world, but heâ€™s desperate!

Mary canâ€™t really understand why he went around with so much cash on him and she asks him. Michael explains that he was going to deposit it at the bank in Abidjan, to cover the cheque for 50 thousand dollars he paid as an advance on the diamond shipment agreement. Upset, he explains his position to her, tormenting himself because he knows it isnâ€™t normal to turn to her to ask for help. Heâ€™d rather die, but heâ€™s deeply distressed! Heâ€™s got to find a solution because if he doesnâ€™t cover the cheque the deal will fall through, and heâ€™ll also have to pay a fine.

The rest of the story unfortunately, as you can imagine, is an impoverishment of poor Mary in favour of the crook, who is not called Michael, but is a young African and part of a gang specialised in romance scams.

The story told by Lucien

«My mother had sent several remittances to Michael, in Ivory Coast, for various reasons. It began with 50 thousand dollars through Western Union and Money Gram, because she was upset by the attack on the man she had fallen in love with and his serious condition. She used up all her savings to help him, because anyway he told her he would pay the loan back as soon as he was better again.

Once the shipments for the sale of the diamonds began he would personally come to Rome to bring her a cheque and start their future together. But the man had a great deal of financial obligations at that sad moment in time. We all know the cost of a clinic, rehabilitation, the expense of hotel accommodation, and the second tranche for the import-export business.

My mother even sold her apartment - says Lucien - to keep up with the constant demands of that man, who convinced her with false, urgent and unavoidable reasons. When she realised she had been scammed, she became depressed. Sad and without any financial resources left, she tormented herself every day for having been so stupid when she should have realised it was a scam and sought advice. But she didn't.

I sent my mother to be treated, to help her overcome her moral disorientation. But wounds like that are difficult to heal at her age».

The providential money transfer receipts

Luckily Mary had kept all the Western Union and Money Gram receipts. She also maintained contact with her scammer, while her son Lucien sought information amongst his journalist friends and went so far as to consult an Interpol branch, where an agent got to work investigating and had the members of the gang arrested.

Subsequently, after it had received proof of the sums sent, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Ivory Coast took steps to return the money to her.

But Mary's pain at having been hit like that in her feelings will last a long time yet. Every so often she suddenly awakes in the night because she dreams that someone is taking a bag full of diamonds away from her. She cries out for help and sees a man in the uniform of a Marine laughing mockingly.

Mary grieves every time she awakes and thinks about Michael again. She imagines him as he was in the photos which she gazed at so many times. She can hardly believe that Michael doesn't exist; that his words of love were phrases copied here and there, from romantic texts or invented on the spur of the moment to lure her into a romance scam.

Her computer at home is always turned off now, a piece of equipment that she can't even bear to dust without feeling distressed. The internet is a place of death and suffering. She wouldn't want to go on a social networking site for anything in the world.

Silvia

The protagonist of this story does not want to give her real name. She's a young woman of 32 who in the spring of 2016 received a friend request from a forty-year-old Frenchman, a handsome guy who said his name was Henry Dupont. We'll call her Silvia:

«He messaged me immediately on Messenger - says Silvia - telling me I was his type and he'd fallen in love with me. He put lots of little hearts and kisses, he wrote sweet things to me. I felt a little uncomfortable, because his zeal seemed excessive, considering that I barely knew him. In fact, I didn't know him, I'd only seen a picture of him, which although nice, was not very meaningful for me as to who this person was.

So, I ignored him for a couple of days. I didn't want to be invaded like that in my private life by unsolicited affection.

Henry contacted me again, I answered out of politeness. I read his loving words and meanwhile I thought that perhaps I was acting unfairly towards Gianni, my companion who I hadn't been getting along with very well lately. We were arguing for every silly little thing and going out together less often than before».

Henry turns up online again every evening, he talks to Silvia and tells her about his life. He tells her she's a widower with two children, a boy and a girl. Then he touches on the very sad topic of his wife's death which happened several years earlier. He speaks to her of his loneliness, with two small children to bring up without their mother. He sends her touching photos of the children with their daddy (a sad and disconsolate man!). Silvia very correctly informs him that she already has a companion and is not interested in other affairs, especially with people she doesn't know directly. But Henry doesn't desist, he sends her more pictures with flowers, beating hearts, endearing little teddies and phrases full of tenderness.

Silvia is cautious, and this can be deduced from her words. She's not a woman who is used to making light-hearted decisions. If she did, she would feel guilty towards her companion because, although their relationship is a little difficult, she's aware that he doesn't deserve to be cast aside.

The woman's resistance to Henry is effective, however her slightly veiled initial interest increases day by day. After all it's unusual to be the object of so much attention and affection. There is reason enough to be flattered.

One evening Henry writes to her that the following day he will fly to Ivory Coast, where his family has a real estate business. Silvia wishes him a pleasant journey.

For two days she hears nothing from him. Then he starts writing to her again spending time chatting online to her. He tells her that those moments are the only peaceful ones of his day. He isn't happy in the environment around him. In fact, he doesn't go out at night, he doesn't mix with anyone and above all he doesn't trust anyone because he's in a dangerous place. The roads are lined with prostitutes, robbers, pickpockets.

One evening he tells her she's chatted to his daughter. She's sent him a kiss writing: **SMACK!** in large letters. Silvia is moved by this and smiles. She tells him it's beautiful having such affectionate children.

After the roses and flowers, we can expect an ill-fated event

Contact between Henry and Silvia is interrupted for about ten days. She doesn't get in touch with him. After all, apart from the flattering declarations of love, she's not really interested in him. Or at least, she's not interested enough to go looking for him or get worried about his absence.

Henry suddenly gets in touch again, telling her he's been mugged shortly before returning home. Without beating about the bush, he asks her to help him out with some money, because he's been left high and dry. He has nothing. He tells her the details of the armed robbery that he's suffered at the hands of two thugs. Frightened of being killed Henry gave them everything he had on him: his wallet, his credit card, his gold watch.

Silvia answers that she is sorry. Henry insists on asking her to send him money. She doesn't have money and tells him so, but Henry continues to describe all his trials and tribulations. He says he has nothing, not even the minimum to be able to eat. Silvia advises him to make a complaint to the police. He answers he's already done that, but all the same, he's still without any resources. Only she can help him.

«No.» replies Silvia. «I don't have money to give to anyone. I can barely cover my own expenses!»

«You're heartless!» the man rants, «I need the money for my children!»

So, she starts questioning him. The usual questions that would come to mind to anyone. She asks him where his relatives in the real estate business are. She wants him to explain why his children are in Ivory Coast and not in France.

Henry gets cross, he tells her she hasn't understood a thing of what he's told her. He makes excuses for his contradictions. Then he changes tone and asks her for a lower figure. A thousand euros will suffice. «Can she send whatever she can! He'll pay back every cent.»

Silvia interrupts the conversation. Embittered she does some research and discovers he's a scammer.

She was about to fall for it too, but in this case, she's always kept a level head. She didn't let herself be enchanted, a little thanks to her personality, a little because basically that unknown man never really seemed completely convincing to her. To be precise, let's say the romantic talk on his part was fake, there never was any on her part.

Daria

«It happened to me as well. Two months of really loving letters and sweet words that any woman would love to hear».

This is how Daria's story begins; she calls the person who scammed her a shady individual. She says she used to think these things happened to old-age pensioners or to little naïve, lonely women, and she specifically uses derogatory phrases to define the individuals in this story, because she's full of contempt for herself. She feels stupid, with no excuse, just a poor, weak woman. Daria tells her story on Massimo Cappanera's blog, the clinical psychologist who is an expert on web scams and invites people to tell their stories of what happened to them, so those reading are warned and don't fall into the same trap.⁷

I spent two months living in the clouds

Marcello says he's Italian when he approaches Daria. But from how he expresses himself, it's clear that he's not. She points out that his written Italian is not very good, and he justifies it by explaining that he was born in Italy, but his mother is German. His father died when he was a child, and on the death of his father, his mother decided to relocate to Great Britain where they lived for many years.

Daria speaks several languages and she tells him to choose whichever he prefers: Spanish, English, German.

«I'm a widower, and I have a twelve-year-old daughter - he explains - I travel a lot on international business. I take my little girl and the baby sitter with me because I don't like leaving my daughter alone. It's just the two of us all alone in the world.»

At this, Daria starts to nourish compassion and understanding for this widowed man with his sweet daughter always at his side.

«I'm based in Bristol for work - continues Marcello - but my business takes me everywhere. I organise big expensive tenders.»

«That's quite a demanding job!», observes Daria.

«Yes, but I'm used to the work and to travelling. I'm happy with the way business is going. The only thing missing in my life is a woman to sweep me off my feet. I'm happy because I've found her now, but my happiness will only be complete when I can embrace you.»

«Will that day be soon?»

«Sooner than you think!», Marcello assures her emphatically.

«When?»

«I hate talking about money, but I can tell you. I chose a tender for 7.5 million instead of 12, because the first is shorter and we can see each other sooner. I can't wait to meet you. You're so beautiful, lovable (the man starts to list her qualities and the feelings he has for her). Sweet Daria I do nothing but think of you!»

Marcello goes on to explain his plans for their meeting which will take place on his return from a trip by ship to Cyprus where he's about to go to buy equipment that will be used for the construction of a bridge.

«Everything was going marvellously well - says Daria - even if there were a few small contradictions in his words which however, having decidedly thrown caution to the wind, I didn't pick up on.»

And here are the incredible aspects of this story

Marcello often speaks of the mystical dimension of their meeting, it was without doubt God's work. It's the fate of two hearts which resemble one another and seek each other to achieve happiness. They meet with divine intervention and love each other for life.

All fine, then! But here too - as in a tried and tested screenplay - a catastrophe occurs. Daria is informed of something unexpected and unusual. Marcello is in the port of Cyprus when pirates storm a ship that left before theirs. The captain is dead, having been killed, while shots ring out wildly, and blood flows everywhere. The pirates take some hostages. Marcello has a container full of cash and the precious documents for his tender.

«My darling - he tells her - you know I'm alone in the world without you. You're the only person I trust. Do me the immense favour of looking after the package I managed to hide, until I arrive in Italy.»

«Okay,» replies Daria.

«Give me your address!» says Marcello.

Daria sends him her address and phone number. He explains that he has already paid eight thousand euros for transport and there should be a small fee for domestic taxes which the company cannot estimate before the arrival of the package at its destination.

The woman spends two distressing and very long days almost without sleep because of the anxiety this unexpected situation is causing her. She thinks of Marcello's safety, of his incolumity. She's afraid. She doesn't know what to do in the meantime, until late at night she receives a delivery note by email from a transport company called *Turkiye Diplomatic Security Company*. The note is full of stamps and has the appearance of something very important and official. However, something is missing for the delivery to be made. For the company's security agents to deliver the parcel to Daria's home address, a payment of 2500 euro must be made for domestic taxes and VAT. The sum must be paid by bank transfer before delivery. Daria, terrified by the weight of the responsibility, does not know what decision to make. She calls Marcello on the phone, but there's no answer. So she tries calling his company and nobody answers there either. She searches for the company on the Internet but cannot find it. Then she really experiences a state of conflicting anxieties. She's tempted to pay the money, but she hasn't got enough. Then she thinks of asking her sister for help. She goes to her. «I've got a really serious problem,» she tells her agitatedly, «I need 2500 euros urgently!»

«What?»

«Yes, I need it to release a shipment!»

«Sit down a moment and tell me everything from the beginning,» her sister orders her.

«Well, I met Marcello chatting online. He does business deals!»

Daria talks to her sister and, as she tells her about those incredible events, she realises that her foggy brain is starting to clear.

«She saw the light by herself! - she says - I couldn't believe my own words as I talked and listened to myself.»

Daria's story ends here. With her sister, who luckily helped her open her eyes and consoled her sorrow a little.

But she wants to end her story like this:

«To finish, let me tell you, that even if we're smart, intelligent people, these things can happen, in the heat of the moment. One very important thing is not to keep everything inside us. We enter a tunnel where reality is easily confused with fantasy unless we share it with someone. I hope I haven't bored you with this long story, and I also hope I've been of help to someone, like you've been to me, thanks!»⁸.

Serena

This is Serena's story, freely adapted from the blog on World Romance Scams⁹. The site gathers countless testimonials from anyone who wants to share their own experience to help other women, before they fall for a romance scam, or after they've been left heartbroken to show them the way back towards regaining their self-esteem:

«My name is Serena and I'm 31 years old; one day I met a very handsome and dashing man on Facebook who sent me a friend request. I'd never heard of the existence of fake profiles, so I trusted him. He was polite, romantic, attentive; he often told me he thanked God for having made us meet. I couldn't see anything wrong, so I carried on. He told me what he did; he was at sea on an oil tanker. He was a widower and had a daughter. Slowly I became infatuated with him and I asked to meet. He said he couldn't come ashore but would do so as soon as possible.

One day he wrote to me saying that the ship had a leak and they had to dock. He told me they had problems with the insurance which didn't cover the damage and all their jobs were at risk. He asked me to help him by sending him five thousand euros. I believed him and did it. Then he asked me for more money for further work on the ship. He explained they were making a collection and he needed another five thousand euros. I sent them to him. I was starting to spend too much money and by chance I saw an advert on Facebook for the «World Romance Scam» association. I clutched at it. I wrote to them. Dr Ansaldi replied asking me to call her on the phone. Since then she has been helping me. She helped me understand what trouble I'd got myself into, and she sent me photos of the fraudster proving to me that this person had already targeted other women.

I followed her suggestions blindly to get through the tunnel leading back to reality. I blocked all contact with him. I no longer answered his calls; I cried, I couldn't sleep, I felt awful, but I knew I had to succeed and Dr Ansaldi was always there for me. In the end he disappeared and for me that was the end of a nightmare that could have caused a lot more damage if I hadn't found «Worldromancescam.org». Now I know what fake profiles really are, and I'm vaccinated against them. I just wanted everyone to know that you can heal from these addictions and I'm living proof of that».

The associations, the media, the institutions that deal with this problem which has now spread beyond all expectations

The *World Romance Scam* association does a good job in disclosing information and prevention. On its website and its Facebook page, women interact who have fallen prey to romance scams and want to actively do something to safeguard and help others. Their introduction on the site's home page is this:

«Association against romance scams, assistance and advice to victims; investigations, information, prevention; reporting according to the Budapest Convention on Cybercrime of 23/04/2001 and subsequent updates».

Looking at the posts published on their Facebook page you can see an infinity of pictures found to be fake. One carries this warning:

«This is another fake using the photo of an Italian model; he calls himself Jean Marck Venus.»

The answer from one member is the following: «He told me his name was Oliver Perrot!».

Scrolling through the page, many personalities have been cloned by the fraudsters. There's a picture of a highly decorated and oblivious naval officer, with a strong-willed and interesting face and the fictitious name of Ken Scaparotti. Further down a video with the warning: «New fake who says his name is Miguel Pazamini or Jean Marc Riviet.»

The comment underneath is by a certain Marta: «Last April this person was called Sebastien Perrot!».

So, the search continues, on the site, to find the real identity of the fraudsters and to expose the photos linked to the lies that the cunning scammers tell about themselves. There are pictures of many different types of men; handsome men, not so handsome but interesting men, sportsmen in modern clothing, officers in high uniform, teachers, doctors.

Going on to examine the posts we find pictures of women, mostly young ones (also unwitting clones) that are posted on social spaces with fake profiles and minimum information, invented to set up - like a bait at sea - profitable romance scams. Sole purpose: to get money out of victims found on the web.

The photographs are all real but stolen from men and women who are unaware they are so loved for their real likenesses and for a fake personal history diligently performed by downright thieves.

Rossana

Rossana also tells her story on Cappanera's blog. She writes that she finds the stories of other women and the advice on the web very useful¹⁰. In turn she wants to talk about her story, to help anyone reading not to fall into the scam:

«I recently started doing web marketing for my business and looking for contacts and friends on Facebook I ran into this man ... note that I sent him a friend request among many others that I sent. Shortly afterwards he contacted me on Facebook chat».

The man who answers her appears to be suspicious because Rossana's profile doesn't have a picture, but a graphic image. He wants a photograph to accept the friend request. She sends him one and a daily correspondence begins. The man's name is Fred and he tells her he's English, from London, single, 40 years old, a civil engineer. He's what they call a good catch. He's also a handsome man.

But let's see how Rossana's tale continues:

«The conversation was always in English which I know quite well. Initially, to test the waters, I also tried writing a few sentences in Italian, but he didn't understand. We chatted happily for a day or two, but in the meantime - with great class I have to admit - he started to become "friendlier" and began using affectionate names for me such as "dear", then "honey" (and take note, the first time he used this nickname he apologised for having done so). I must admit, I liked it a lot. He made me feel looked after, thought about, at what was, I have to admit, not a very happy time in my love life (and when I say time I sometimes forget it's been going on for years now!) so I let him carry on».

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