

## The cruellest con

[Ian Harvey](#). [Chatelaine](#). (English edition). Toronto: [Dec 2007](#). Vol. 80, Iss. 13; pg. 85, 3 pgs

### Abstract (Summary)

Tens of thousands of sensible, educated men and women around the world have found themselves heartbroken and financially compromised after falling prey to well-organized gangs mostly working out of Nigeria and Ghana. [...] Davis said his hotel manager advised him that the best bet for spending money was to get traveller's cheques in South African rand from a bank in South Africa.

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### Full Text (1184 words)

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#### [Headnote]

The latest predators are scouring dating websites looking to steal hearts - and then money.

From the window of her apartment, Karen Edwards" gazed at a view of Toronto bathed in the sunshine of a warm spring day. But all she felt was cold.

She was broke and out of work, and the man she had fallen in love with had betrayed her. More than that, he'd taken her money and stripped away her self-worth. She was crushed, prone to crying and sinking into the clutches of depression.

Her mistake was to believe in fairy-tale romances and to trust a man who had wooed her online, only to end up a victim of a scam in which con artists stalk their victims through internet dating sites.

Edwards is not alone. Tens of thousands of sensible, educated men and women around the world have found themselves heartbroken and financially compromised after falling prey to well-organized gangs mostly working out of Nigeria and Ghana. There are no firm numbers about the scope of these online romance scams, because most victims are too embarrassed to report the crime. And even if a crime is reported, police often have their hands tied: The perpetrators are hard to identify and, arguably, the victims willingly advanced money to them. However, one website, [www.romancescams.org](#), reported 760 incidents in which the total loss was US\$6 million, an average of US\$7,900 per victim.

"I kept thinking, 'How could I be so stupid? How could this happen to me?'" Edwards recalls. It began innocently enough last January when the 38-year-old receptionist cruised one of several singles dating sites. Tall, with a big smile, Edwards is an independent Albertan transplant, a proud truck owner who lives alone with her cat, Oreo. She'd been in a few relationships over the years, but never married. The singles sites, such as [www.eharmony.com](#) and [www.singlesnet.com](#), offered her a way to meet a potential partner without having to go to bars.

"Usually I just chatted with people from Canada, but after a while I started talking to people in the U.S.," she says. "Then in January, I got an email from a guy in Massachusetts. He said he liked my profile and was interested in getting to know me."

Over the ensuing weeks she got to know Philip Davis\*, a graphic designer who claimed to own a successful business. His story was simple: Born and raised in Atlanta, Georgia, he had no strong family ties; self-reliant and somewhat isolated, he

yearned for love but had never married or had children. At 42, he felt that something was missing from his life, "the relationship I've been too busy to get involved with." Soon they graduated to phone calls.

Edwards didn't enter into anything blindly. "His stories always jibed; nothing seemed out of place," she says. "I was watching out for liars. I just never realized they would be this smooth."

In early March, he said the magic words: "I think I'm falling in love." Elated, she confessed similar feelings and they began to plan a life together. Davis suggested they meet somewhere special. He said he would buy her a ticket to Sun City, South Africa, because meeting on each other's home turf would be too distracting. Edwards had just been laid off from her job and was ready to dive into a relationship that would take her all over the world. He flew to Johannesburg first because, he said, he wanted to scout out business opportunities; she would join him later.

But the ticket he promised her seemed jinxed. Time after time, Edwards checked her itinerary only to find the ticket was merely on hold. Meanwhile, Davis said his hotel manager advised him that the best bet for spending money was to get traveller's cheques in South African rand from a bank in South Africa.

Edwards wired a \$700 money order to the hotel manager, and in return got copies of what looked like traveller's cheques. But, a little suspicious, she showed them to a teller at her bank, who confirmed the worst: They were forgeries.

"That was every last penny I had," she says. "I wasn't looking for a new job because I thought I was going to go live with him. I had no money, no food, nothing."

Edwards didn't immediately pin the fraud on Davis, who kept pushing for more money. He said he'd been mugged and needed a new computer; then he needed money to export some African art. In mid-April, the light went on for Edwards. Nothing added up: the cancelled flights, the traveller's cheques, the African art. Edwards started investigating Davis's background. "I learned how to check his IP address [the code that shows where the sender is accessing the internet] and traced his emails and got very, very sick. All the correspondence came from Africa."

BARB SLUPPICK, THE CO-FOUNDER of [www.romancescams.org](http://www.romancescams.org), has heard it all before. She calls these scams the cruellest of all cons: "They steal your heart, then your money."

"We find that the large majority of the cons have a connection to Nigeria, with profile pictures usually taken from modelling websites," says Ontario Provincial Police detective sergeant Debbie Bell, who works at Phonebusters, a national antifraud call centre. It fields approximately three calls a week from Canadians who think they're being lured into a romance scam. "There are different tactics: One is where the goal is for the victim to send money for a plane ticket, which is never purchased. Another is an ongoing drama in which they constantly need money for one thing or another. There's never any assurance of financial recovery. People must be vigilant."

The groups often work in teams out of internet cafes, initially using form-letter scripts that are sent at random to profiles on singles sites. The voices on telephone calls may not even belong to the people sending the emails. It's a cookie-cutter scam in which the goal is to win the victim's trust and then strike for cash.

It may sound improbable, but it works. "Words are powerful," Sluppick says. "It doesn't matter who you are. Doctors, lawyers - we have them all among the 27,000 people who have come to our site for help in the last two years."

With no money, no job and depression preventing her from looking for work, Edwards's world quickly came crashing down. "I lost my truck because I couldn't keep up with the payments, then I lost my apartment because I was behind in the rent, and I hardly ate for three months," she says.

Slowly, Edwards is rebuilding her life and her career. Nearly six months after it all blew up, she's working again, has regained possession of her truck and is determined not to give up on love.

"I have to learn to open my heart again," she says and smiles. "But I'll make sure I meet them in person."

**[Sidebar]**

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**[Footnote]**

\* Names have been changed.