

Con artist lured literati on Web  
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"Her mouth was dry; shaking, beads of sweat beginning to roll down her forehead, the fear almost overwhelming her. They were getting closer, closer ..."

-- From the novel *Sins*, by L.R. Thomas, a.k.a. Lisa Hackney, a.k.a. Elisabeth von Hüllessem, a.k.a. Melanie Mills.

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VICTORIA - She sat in the prisoner's docket, a diminutive woman draped in a white, jail-issue jumpsuit, the kind reserved for people considered a risk to themselves and to others.

There had been an incident Tuesday night, down in the Victoria Police Department cells.

The woman had apparently attempted suicide. She had covered her face with cellophane. She now claims to have lost her memory. She doesn't remember being arrested here last week.

She doesn't know where she is, or why she is in trouble. So she would have us believe.

She sounded bewildered in court on Thursday. "Can you tell me who I am?" she asked, her voice trembling.

She has many names, many identities. Sometimes, she is L.R. Thomas, author. Or Melanie Mills, hard-working literary agent. Or Elisabeth von Hüllessem, European sophisticate and celebrity event planner.

Down in Madison County, Ark., Sheriff Phillip Morgan knows her as Lisa Hackney, 49, an itinerant fraud artist and fugitive who allegedly assaulted her mother five years ago, driving a car into her and breaking her hip.

Ms. Hackney has been on the run ever since, allegedly pulling a variety of scams under different aliases in the southeastern U.S. Last summer, she high-tailed it to Canada.

Operating under the name Elisabeth von Hüllessem, she pretended to organize a literary conference in Banff. It was to be a grand, if unlikely, affair, with guest appearances by the likes of Elton John and Celine Dion.

Ms. Hackney appeared in Banff just long enough to create a legitimate-looking conference Web site promoting the event. It was all a con: There was no conference, just a lot of victims. Ms. Hackney pocketed at least \$10,000 in registration fees and hit the road again, driving westward in a stolen Ford Taurus.

In September, she landed in Victoria, and found a gig as caregiver to an elderly lady. She moved into the woman's house, at the end of a secluded lane. It seemed a perfect place to hide. But Ms. Hackney's past soon caught up with her.

Veronica Strauss runs Writers Beware, a Massachusetts-based service that tracks questionable literary agents and publishing houses. In late 2001, she began hearing complaints about a shadowy agent named Melanie Mills.

"She represented herself as an agent, but she wanted \$300 up-front fees from potential clients, which is not standard," Ms. Strauss says. "We received 25 complaints about her. She was receiving money, and in almost every case was doing nothing and misleading people. She had this veneer of legitimacy."

In 2002, the agent known as Melanie Mills changed her tack: She began offering unsuspecting clients editing services, for a hefty price. Stanley Weinstock, a former New York City assistant probation commissioner, hired her.

"I never actually met Melanie Mills," says Mr. Weinstock, now retired and living in Florida. "We communicated over the Internet or by telephone. I had written a novel, and she was the first agent to respond to my queries. I sent her more than \$1,000 to edit my manuscript. She said there was interest from Little Brown [a prestigious publishing house based in New York], which I now know is not true. I never heard from her again."

Last spring, Mr. Weinstock received an e-mail from the M.W. Mills Literary Agency, informing him his agent had been killed in an automobile accident. He was moved enough to mail a sympathy card, addressed to the agency. It was returned to him unopened. He finally began to suspect that there was no Melanie Mills.

A Writers Beware message board began posting angry Internet messages about the so-called agent and editor, who had burned dozens of aspiring writers. Before her "death," Melanie Mills had also organized a phony literary conference in North Carolina.

The penny dropped in October, with reports of the bogus Banff literary conference, organized by Elisabeth von Hüllessem.

"It seemed like a very similar scam to the one that this Melanie Mills had [perpetrated] in North Carolina," Ms. Strauss says. "I called the RCMP in Banff. They said they were already looking into a possible connection."

The Mounties quickly determined that Melanie Mills, Elisabeth von Hüllessem and Lisa Hackney were all the same person, wanted in Madison County on charges of aggravated assault and for jumping bail. She is also wanted in Missouri, for theft.

But by this time, she had already arrived in Victoria. Introducing herself as Elisabeth von Hüllessem, she told people she was a writer, working on a novel. She needed a quiet place to finish her book. For three weeks, she lodged in an elderly woman's house,

cooking for her and occasionally taking her out for coffee.

Something about Elisabeth von Hüllessem seemed odd. A local eldercare specialist thought she was rude. She was vague about her past, telling people she was divorced, and from California. And yet she drove a Ford Taurus with New York licence plates.

The local police were called to investigate. Officers ran a check on the woman's vehicle. It had been stolen in Missouri. The plates had been pilfered from another vehicle. Under the mattress where the imposter had slept was a hammer, its handle wrapped in cellophane. "I shudder to think what she intended to do with that," the elder care specialist said this week.

Lisa Hackney was promptly arrested and escorted back to Banff, where she pleaded guilty to one count of fraud relating to the bogus writers' conference. A judge ordered her to pay US\$7,083.78 restitution to her victims. She tried to raise the money on eBay, the online auction site, by raffling her bizarre personal story -- along with a lunch and an autographed copy of the novel Sins, a potboiler she had written under the pseudonym L.R. Thomas. There were no takers.

Back in Madison County, Ark., police began the slow process of launching an extradition request. But Ms. Hackney left Banff in late November, having spent one month in police custody. She vanished.

Last month, she resurfaced in Victoria, passing herself off to a pair of unsuspecting realtors as Melanie Mills, literary superstar, in town to purchase a multi-million-dollar estate. The realtors agreed to work with her. But they wondered about her story. They searched the Internet for the name "Melanie Mills." Within seconds, they were directed to the Writers Beware message board, where they discovered the truth about their erstwhile client. Police apprehended Ms. Hackney shortly thereafter.

She is a tiny woman, barely five feet tall, with a broad face, wide mouth, deep-set eyes. In court this week, she surprised everyone, arriving in shackles and wearing what police call a "bunny suit," the white overalls commonly reserved for dangerous prisoners.

On Wednesday, defence lawyer John Green told the court that while he had been retained to represent Ms. Hackney, he had decided to terminate the arrangement. He explained that, following her apparent suicide attempt this week, Ms. Hackney "claims she doesn't recognize me. She doesn't know why she is here."

Mr. Justice F. Allen Melvin of the B.C. Supreme Court ordered Ms. Hackney to immediately undergo a brief psychiatric assessment; she was found to be co-operative and bright. However, the psychiatric nurse who performed the assessment could not state with certainty the next day whether Ms. Hackney's sudden bout of amnesia was just another con.

Judge Melvin looked straight at Ms. Hackney, draped in her bunny suit for the second straight day. "Do you expect to have another lawyer?" the judge asked.

"I don't know," she replied, from her perch in the docket. "Where am I ... can you tell me who I am? Does someone know that?"

"No one here that I know," the judge said.

With that, he ordered that she undergo a full-scale, 21-day psychiatric evaluation at a forensics facility near Vancouver. It could be several more months before she faces an extradition hearing and is forced to leave Canada. By then, her story may have changed yet again.