

DOPPELGÄNGER

“I assure you, there is no mistake,” she said, closing the file.

Howard ground his teeth. His dentist was always telling him that he ground his teeth, and he told him he didn't, or at least wasn't conscious of it, but now he was grinding his teeth. Maybe his dentist was on to something. But had he ever had an occasion so worthy of tooth-grinding? He didn't think so! Then it occurred to him. Of course, his dentist!

“But surely my dental records—?”

“Inconclusive. And because they were inconclusive they were rejected by the IVS.”

“Inconclusive? But they're never inconclusive, are they?”

“There had been repeated attempts to access your dental records without success. From two different computers. Looked like hacking.”

“No, no, I was just trying to use that damned new Patient Portal electronic medical records thing. I couldn't get in from my desktop so I tried my laptop. Even the woman in the dentist's office couldn't help me get in.”

“Well, the IVS has rejected your dental records as an identifier.”

“Look, don't you think you put too much emphasis on this Identity Verification Software?”

“Oh, no, no—absolutely not. It is state of the art. What would you have us do—go back to human error?”

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It had all started so innocuously. A few weeks ago he'd gotten a call from his bank.

"I just wanted to verify a purchase on your credit card," the woman said. "We have identified it as suspicious, outside your usual purchasing patterns. Did you purchase five large packs of steaks, a cordless drill, and a snuggly blanket at Sam's Club last Wednesday?"

He told her he hadn't. He couldn't remember the last time he'd had a steak and he didn't know what he'd do with a cordless drill. He couldn't even drive a nail straight. The snuggly blanket sounded intriguing but he wasn't a member of Sam's Club.

"My credit card hasn't been stolen," he said. "How could this have happened?"

"Someone must have gotten your number and had an inside person they worked with. They'll probably be eating steak for a while."

He remembered using the card at the Knife and Fork Diner around the corner from his house a few days before. He'd absent-mindedly run out of food and had only noticed when it was time for dinner.

"I'm afraid you'll have to come into the bank and sign an affidavit," the woman said. "Because of the delay. We've been trying to call you for a couple of days. Have you been out of town?"

"No, no, I must have just been out."

He didn't tell her that more often than not he didn't answer the phone. It was usually just someone with some silly offer or some computerized questionnaire or somebody who wanted him to contribute to something. He'd thought about having the phone taken out but occasionally he got a call about a job so he hadn't. So he'd gone in and signed the affidavit and the woman had assured him that everything would be okay

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and that the unauthorized balance would come off his card in a few days. But it was still on his next statement from the bank. What's more, there were further charges at Sam's Club, this time for salmon croquettes, motor oil, and the complete first five seasons of "The Walking Dead" on 21 DVDs. He was too shocked to pause and reflect on the image of some larcenous soul eating salmon croquettes while watching "The Walking Dead" wrapped in a snuggy blanket. He called the bank for an explanation.

He couldn't remember the name of the woman he'd dealt with before and got someone else. "Let me look into this," she said. "Mind if I put you on hold for a minute?"

He did mind but what choice did he have? Being on hold was one thing. He was put into that perdition of looping nursing home piano playing and monotonous inane melody that businesses inexplicably think beguiles frustrated customers waiting for answers to their important questions. By the time the woman finally came back on the line he felt like a war prisoner.

"I'm sorry," she said, "but there has apparently been a problem on this."

"What kind of problem?"

"Well," she said slowly, "it appears that there is some question about your identity."

"What? Well, of course, I'm Howard Clark. Always have been."

"Have you ever been known by another name?"

"Heavens no!"

"This is most unusual. Look, this is beyond anything I can resolve. I'm going to have to put you in touch with Sentinel Associates."

"Who are they?"

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“The identity verification company we work with.”

“But my name is on the account and I don’t even own a car.”

“I’m sorry?”

“Motor oil! Motor oil!”

“Oh, yes, I see. I just can’t do anything. Here’s the number for Sentinel Associates.”

As she gave it to him he asked why she couldn’t talk to them.

“You’ll have to talk to them directly.”

“But this isn’t an identity theft issue. It’s just an unauthorized use of a credit card.”

“It falls under the definition of identity theft in OPOPA.”

He was confused. “Do you need to take a call from your dad?”

“The Omnibus Property Oversight and Protection Act. Under OPOPA we had to hire Sentinel. And under OPOPA the identity theft subject has direct access to the identity verification company, not us.”

“But can’t I delegate to you?”

“No, sorry. Good luck.”

He called the number for Sentinel and got a woman with a nasal monotone that made his scalp crawl. He explained his problem. She said she’d put him through to someone who could help him.

“What is that person’s name?” he asked.

“Sorry, I can’t tell you that.”

“OPOPA?”

“You need to take a call from your dad?”

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In a moment a man with an authoritative voice came on the line.

“Clive Sturdevant,” he said.

“I’m delighted to get your name, Mr. Sturdevant. The woman I just spoke with said she couldn’t give it to me.”

“Oh, Clive Sturdevant isn’t my real name. It’s my customer interface name. But you can reach me using it.”

“But why on earth do you have a customer interface name?”

“Company policy.”

“What on earth for?”

“Sometimes people get angry with us.”

“Because you tell them they’re someone they aren’t?”

“Something like that. Now, what can I do for you?”

“I was referred by my bank. You see someone has been using my credit card number at Sam’s Club to buy steaks and salmon . . . ”

“Hmmm, good taste I’d say.”

“And something called a snuggy blanket.”

“They’re great. Nothing warmer. Do you have one?”

“No, I don’t—”

“You ought to get one. You know, my feet used to always get cold but I got one of those snuggy blankets and keep it wrapped up around my feet and they stay like toast.”

“But they think I’m not Howard Clark?”

“Who does?”

“My bank. Or you do, I guess. They referred me to you.”

“Yeah, yeah, ever since OPOPA. What’s your account number?”

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“With whom?”

“Why with us of course.”

“I have no idea. I didn’t even know you existed until a few minutes ago.”

“Oh, we’re here all right. But I can’t do a thing for you without an account number.”

“You can’t just work with my name?”

“Which name.”

“My name, of course. Howard Clark.”

“No, no, we don’t work with names. Names are too malleable. That’s what we’re all about, the malleability of names.”

“I can give you my social security number.”

“No, we can’t ask for those since OPOPA.”

“You’re not asking for it. I’m volunteering to give it to you.”

“We can’t receive that information or keep it on file.”

“Just keep it in your head until you find my file.”

“I couldn’t do that. Wouldn’t trust myself. You might end up being someone else.”

“That’s the problem to begin with!”

“Yes, yes, I understand.”

“How in the world can I find out what I need to find out from you to get my bank records straight?”

“You’ll have to call the bank and get your account number with us.”

“Why can they give that to me and you can’t?”

“Because they’re ASAPs under OPOPA. We aren’t. It’s a security measure.”

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“They’re what?”

“Authorized Security and Protection Agents.”

So he called the bank back and got his account number with Sentinel. “Just out of curiosity,” he asked, an edge developing to his usually bland and inflectionless voice, “why didn’t you give me this number to begin with when you told me I had to call Sentinel?”

“Couldn’t,” the woman said, yet a third woman in his bank odyssey. “You have to ask for it first. We can’t just give it to you.”

“Let me guess: OPOPA.”

“Oh, no, no: WICCA.”

“Huh?”

“The Well-Informed Consumer and Customer Act.”

“Isn’t that like a witchcraft church or something?”

“Huh?”

He called Sentinel back armed with his account number and asked for Clive Sturdevant.

After a moment she said, “I’m sorry, sir, but we have no one of that name here.”

“I know, I know. It’s not his real name. I don’t know his real name.”

“You don’t understand, sir. There is no one here with that customer interface name.”

“But I just talked to him.”

“Well, sir, I don’t doubt that you just talked to someone but it couldn’t have been a Clive Sturdevant because we don’t have a Clive Sturdevant. We maintain a list of

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customer interface names and there is no such name on our list. Maybe you misheard the customer interface name.”

“You don’t mishear a name like Clive Sturdevant, Ms.—”

“Witherspoon.”

“Your customer interface name?”

“Of course.”

“Well, who can I talk to?”

“I see here that Mr. Cornelius’s line has just opened up. I’ll transfer you.”

Cornelius came on the line with a tone of bonhomie that seemed decidedly misplaced, booming, “Miles Cornelius. What can I do for you?”

“Do you know Clive Sturdevant?”

“Why no, should I?”

“Never mind.” He explained his problem, at length and with increasing stridency.

“Okay, Mr. Clark, or whatever your name is—”

“Clark. Clark. My name is Clark. I don’t know what the hell your name is but mine is Clark.”

“Okay, okay, keep your shirt on. Now what’s that account number again?”

He gave it to him.

“Hmmm,” Cornelius said, “yes, here it is. The IVS has conclusively ruled out the possibility that you are Howard Clark. Well, let me rephrase that: the IVS has determined with a 98.0066234 percentage of accuracy that you’re not Howard Clark. We here at Sentinel take as irrefutable an IVS finding of over 98 percent. So there you have it.”

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This was his first encounter with the Identity Verification Software, a menace to western civilization that increasingly had made the possibility of an Armageddon comprised of all four of the horsemen of the apocalypse on steroids seem tame.

“I . . . am . . . Howard . . . Clark,” he said slowly, methodically.

“I understand that you think that, I understand. Let me ask you a few questions. It’s probably in your file here but it’s quicker this way. Are you married?”

“No.”

“Do you have siblings?”

“No.”

“Are your parents living?”

“No.”

“Where are you employed?”

“I’m self-employed. I’m a free-lance editor. I work out of my home.”

“Driver’s license?”

“No.”

“Do you have any accounts or credit cards other than the bank card?”

“No. Wait a minute. I have a phone.”

“A cell phone?”

“No, no, a regular phone. On the wall. So I have that account.”

“Let’s see. Yes, I see that here. In the name of Acme Editing. Is that you?”

Damned business account! “Yes. Me. Howard Clark. It’s my business.”

“Well, I don’t see anything here that says that. Anything else. Facebook account? Linked In? Twitter? Instagram? Tweety? Rumpus? Wangdoodle?”

“No.”

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“Business registration or licensure?”

“No, it’s not required.”

“Close personal friends, intimate relationships?”

“No. But I just edited a piece for *The Poultryman’s Journal*. I submitted it to Everett Drinkwater.”

“So this Mr. Drinkwater would know you and state that you are Howard Clark?”

“Well, he never actually met me.”

“There you go. You know, I must congratulate you on having achieved a degree of dissociation from society and personal privacy that is quite rare these days. You didn’t give the IVS much to work with. Maybe that’s why your file is so thin.”

“And so wrong.”

“No, I don’t think so. We trust our technology. As do our clients. If we turned our backs on technology, where would we be?”

He resisted the temptation to say, “Sane.”

Not knowing what else to do, he went back to the bank. He found that his account had been closed and reopened with a new number. He found this out when he was told there was no account with his number and he presented his card with his account number to the teller. She confirmed that there was no current account under that number and that it had been closed.

“What! How could that be?”

“I’m not sure. Let me call my supervisor.”

The supervisor confirmed that the account had been closed and reopened. “Mr. Clark had IVS information from Sentinel. It confirmed that he had been the victim of someone named George Plotkin who had attempted to steal his identity and had made a

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couple of charges on his card at Sam's Club. In such circumstances we cancel the card and recommend that the account be closed and reopened. It's routine."

"Listen, it's not routine! I'm Howard Clark. The other guy is Plotkin. I have ID. I can prove it."

The supervisor gave him a skeptical look.

"Do you think I don't know who you are, Mr. Plotkin? We know about people like you at the Bank of the Americas. Do you have any idea how easy it is to falsify IDs these days?" She smirked. "Of course you do. Now, I advise you to leave before I call the police. I'm sure they would be delighted to hear your tale of being Howard Clark but I'm willing to let you just walk out of here and not come back if you do so right this instant."

That was what brought him to Sentinel for the final reckoning. He took the bus to their local office and tried to read the morning paper on the way but it was hard to concentrate. All of this couldn't be happening, could it? Yes, apparently it could.

The receptionist at Sentinel was a young girl with enormous green eyes. She asked him if he had an appointment and he told her that he didn't but that he didn't need one because he was a personal friend of Clive Sturdevant. He didn't know what made him say that but for whatever reason she seemed to react to it. Her eyes got even bigger and she asked him who he needed to see.

"Your chief of accounts," he said authoritatively.

She looked at a list and called a Ms. Gillette. It was Ms. Gillette who, after perusing his file, had closed it and informed him that there was no mistake. The IVS had spoken. Even his dental records couldn't save the day because of the accursed, inaccessible Patient Portal. When he got home he did something he rarely did. He had a

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drink. And while he was drinking it, he picked up the newspaper and looked at it again, this time with a bit more attention. In the process, he saw something of great interest.

That evening he received a phone call.

“Mr. Clark? Listen, this is a bit unusual but I’m calling to apologize. I have inadvertently been using a credit card of yours. Seems it was sent to me by mistake or something. You know how it is these days. Just too many cards and too much information. Anyway, I want to make everything right with you. This has been a real mixup. Mr. Clark? Mr. Clark, are you there?”

“Yes, Clive, I’m here.”

There was an uneasy laugh at the other end of the line.

“Why are you calling me Clive? That’s not my name.”

“You sure you’re not Clive Sturdevant?”

“Yes, positive.” He laughed again, this time even more uneasily. “What a name, huh? Clive Sturdevant.”

“Yeah, I agree. Even for a customer interface name.” This time there was silence. “The only thing that makes sense is that your customer interface name is Clive Sturdevant but that your real name is Howard Clark.”

“No, no, see that’s where the mixup is. My name is George Plotkin. You’re Howard Clark.”

“No, I think you are the one confused. Good bye, Mr. Clark.”

He hung up and looked again at that newspaper article of interest.

“State Man Wins Record Powerball Jackpot,” it said. The article noted that George Plotkin, who’d worked a number of jobs over the years and most recently had

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been working at the Knife and Fork Diner and as a temp at Sentinel Associates, had won \$65,232,063. All he had to do was present his winning ticket.

Clearly, Mr. Plotkin's ticket had been stolen by a foul miscreant by the name of Howard Clark. The state lottery people could track him down easily enough. He'd just opened a new account at the Bank of the Americas into which he planned to deposit his ill-gotten gains. As for Mr. Plotkin, a nascent fellow with no identifying background information whatsoever, a *tabula rasa*, he too would soon be opening a new bank account into which he would be depositing \$65,232,063, or whatever he got after taxes. It would surely be enough to make Mr. Plotkin's life comfortable for its remaining duration.