

The Accidental Hacker

A short story

Dereck was what you might consider a 'normal' man in his mid-40s. Nothing much interesting had ever happened to him in his life, nor was it ever supposed to. That is, with the exception of when he saved a cat out of a tree, which was about as wild as it got.

His hair had started to thin on the top, perfectly normal, as if the once-thick (though never tidy) fringe had gone to war with his forehead during his late 20s, lost, and made a hasty retreat to the safety of his crown.

His slightly creased clothes were quite unchangingly normal, his normal wardrobe half-filled with a mixture of normal office clothes, normal casual attire and a solitary abnormal T-shirt – a bright pink number with a celebrity's face on it – that he never, ever wore.

He had finished work on this particular day at his normal time, said goodbye to the people he normally would, and scurried off on two pudgy legs to his normal hatchback Toyota, which he had bought at a second-hand car lot for a fairly normal price.

After what could only be described as a normal dinner, he kissed his normal-but-loving wife, Linda, on the temple as he normally did and proceeded down the hallway to his normal, out-of-date computer to browse for an hour or so.

It was as he sat down in his office chair to begin reading recent news headlines that his mind wandered to the subject of money. What was

the date? The 15th of July. That was pay day. Pay day was every 15th and 30th of every month, just like normal.

With a few clicks of his rather unergonomical mouse, his internet banking login page begrudgingly appeared on the monitor, slowly loading with a gently spinning circle centre-screen. A small pile of envelopes sat unevenly on the desk besides his dusty keyboard, all opened and looked at, but subsequently discarded due to their inconvenience.

'Perhaps I should pay those bills...' Dereck thought to himself, eyeing the pile suspiciously, as if they were all from con-artists waiting to steal his money. To be fair, at the rates he was being charged, they may as well have been.

After what was a rather embarrassingly long load time, the login screen was finally ready for his details. Dereck reached for his keyboard with one finger on each hand and tapped the individual letters to spell out his bank number and password.

He did not notice he had made an error in the former section.

One hand moved to the mouse and he slid the pointer over the 'Login' button, double-clicking it even though he only needed to click once.

The spiralling circle returned to the screen in place of the two boxes, quietly chasing its own tail like a dizzy serpent. Moments later, as per normal, the screen changed to his personal home page.

He knew the numbers would be minimal and depressing, as they normally were, but it had been drilled into Dereck from early in his job to always examine a pay cheque. You never knew when Tracey from accounts had made a mistake.

The total balance showed three million dollars.

For a moment, Dereck made no movement that might be considered abnormal. He faulted his own eyesight, then the computer, then – secretly – Tracey from accounts. It had to be wrong.

A strange sound thudded somewhere in the room. Or was it his heart beat? It was going so fast now. He mouthed the number, rolling it

around on his palate as though he were tasting a fine wine, but had no idea how to describe the experience other than by saying, 'Mmm, it's ... good?'

Next, Dereck's mouth gaped open, a trout gasping for water after being caught by an aggressive fisherman. His eyes stared at the screen in awe, unblinking, unwavering. Sheer awe. Something must be wrong. But what? But why? But how? But who?

After many minutes of staring, refreshing, looking around the room to see if there were cameras, then refreshing again and staring for a few moments more, he noticed that the name on the account was different. It wasn't Dereck – it was some other person.

By pure happenstance, someone else's bank details were currently sitting on-screen.

If there was a divine pantheon seated in the rolling clouds above Dereck's normal-looking suburban house, it was the God of Coincidence who gazing down upon him at this time - willing him to have mistyped. It would have been a completely random selection. In addition, the god's name would probably also be Dereck.

It could only be some twisted cosmic joke that led poor normal Dereck to the situation in which he now found himself. He had accidentally managed to log into another person's bank account. Only the most powerful of random events could make two bank numbers so similar and two passwords exactly the same. Regardless, it was real. It had happened.

Reality slithered into his skull like water absorbed by an arid plain. Dereck began to consider the implications of his predicament.

Here he was, sitting on his normal office chair, facing his normal computer, able to transfer money from a bank account with millions in it to whichever other account he desired. Most likely, his own.

But what if he got caught? Surely it would be too obvious to just transfer money into an account that literally had his personal details all over it.

OK, so he could just transfer a little bit. What was a few hundred in a pile of over three million? No. Even that would go amiss. These rich-types always checked their balance, right? Or they had people with glasses and moustaches to do it for them. Every T was crossed, every I dotted.

So what could he do? Doing nothing wasn't an option. Who sits and stares at three million dollars and doesn't do something – anything – with it?

But wait, wasn't doing nothing an option? Couldn't he just log off, close the window and forget he ever saw that many figures in a single bank account? Well of course he could, but then he would be haunted with the Knowing. The Knowing that somewhere out there was a multi-million-dollar bank account that was almost entirely the same as his own, and he would never find it again.

He couldn't live with the Knowing. He could barely live with the knowledge that there was a bright pink T-shirt with a celebrity's face on it in his cupboard that his wife would never let him wear. It was just so *there*. So accessible. But no. It was a locked door, and his wife had the key.

But this door was wide open.

Suddenly Dereck felt a wave of guilt crash over him, like the supposed seventh wave on a beach that was bigger than the others. This was illegal, right? Staring at this stranger's bank details.

'Oh my god,' he thought in terror. *'I'm a hacker. I'm one of those Anonymous people.'*

His wild staring was unyielding. His mind was a whirlwind of possibility, of consequences, of indecisiveness. What he was doing felt so wrong, but so strangely alluring. It was like he was a young schoolboy staring at pornography online for the first time. Every possible negative outcome charged through his brain - a convoy of runaway trains. Was someone watching him? Could the police back-trace his internet and see what he did? Would someone look at his history and see that he was on a

page with three million dollars that he could so easily steal and pay his bills with?

A creak came from down the hall.

Dereck's eyebrows shot up his head, eyes darting to the doorway as if a monster was about to burst through.

His wife was coming.

Oh no.

Wait, was it an 'oh no' moment? Was what he was doing wrong? Would Linda be mad or would she help him decide what to do? No, she was too straight. Surely she would be mad. Surely. Certainly.

But why? It was just an accident, totally innocent. But she might perceive him as a criminal - stealing from the rich. Was that hot, like Robin Hood? No, probably not.

As the normal doorknob turned in its socket with a quiet rattle, he flicked his computer monitor off to be safe. Better safe than sorry, that's what Dereck was taught. He swivelled his seat to face the door and smiled as normally as he could.

Linda entered the room, speaking as she walked.

"Dereck, honey, would you like a cup of-" she stopped mid-sentence, staring at him.

"A cup of tea? That would be lovely, dear," he stammered back. A cold bead of sweat formed on his battlefield of a forehead. Was the monitor a good idea?

"What are you doing?" she asked bluntly.

"I'm just browsing."

"Why did you turn the screen off?" She was pressing. He knew why. The screen was definitely not a good idea.

Just a week ago he had been caught watching what you might consider rather abnormally explicit material, and had since been shamed into never viewing it again. Ever. That had been a promise.

"It..." he paused, thinking, "turned off by itself." His cheeks flushed red. It seemed to be getting hotter. He wondered if he was better off

turning the screen on again.

“Why are your cheeks so red?” She was relentless.

“Because it’s hot in here.”

“I don’t feel it.”

“Well I feel it. Must be from the computer. You know how hot these things can get.”

“Bullshit, Dereck. What are you looking at on there?”

“Just browsing, then the monitor switched off. Argh, so annoying when that happens.” Too late now. It stays off.

She stepped into the room one pace further. It was the most powerful thing she could have done at that moment, short of glaring. Though the glaring would no doubt come next.

“Are you watching that ... that filth again?! We had this conversation, Dereck! It’s sick! It’s abusive to women and it’s disgusting!”

“I’m not watching porn, Linda, I swear!”

She started glaring. Yep, it was definitely more powerful. Dereck felt sick, his sweat now akin to the oily skin of a teenager going through a troublesome puberty.

Her voice rose. “You promised! You promised you would never look at it again!”

“I did, and I haven’t broken my promise! I swear I’m telling the truth. If the monitor was working I would flick it on right now and show you.”

“Oh screw you, Dereck. You always pull this crap. I knew you would never stop, you pervert. My mother always warned me about guys like you! Is this why you never want to make love anymore? Because of this ... this smut you watch online?!”

If this was the United States government, it would most certainly be at DEFCON 3.

“What do you want me to tell you, Linda? I’m not watching porn right now!” Dereck tried his best, but he was a man with a shovel already metres down into the hole. Too far down to press that power button.

“Oh yeah? So what are you doing right now, huh? Why won't you show me? Why are you so flustered? God, I can't believe I've listened to all your crap for so many years.”

DEFCON 2.

“Please, Linda – I swear I'm telling you the truth!”

Her voice lowered. This was it. DEFCON 1.

“Save it, Dereck. Just stop. I'm tired of these arguments. I'm tired of all...” she waved her hand around in a circle, beckoning to the bedroom, “this. This isn't right. This isn't how marriage should be.”

Awoogah, awoogah – nuclear warheads inbound.

She continued, her voice wavering, its energy waning. “I believed in this relationship once. I thought you were my Prince Charming, for God's sake. But we fight so much. We disagree on everything...”

Dereck wanted to flick the monitor on and show her the screen, but then that would prove he was lying about it being broken, right? Sure, he wouldn't be watching what he'd promised not to, but he would be lying, and that was a problem in and of itself.

His hole neared the Earth's core. Perhaps that's why it felt so hot?

“I'm staying at my mother's tonight. I ... I have to think.” And with that, she turned on her heels and left the room. Left the house. She didn't even pack anything.

Dereck thought hard to himself, mopping sweat off his brow with a sleeve. There was gloop enough now to deep-fry a scoop of chips. DEFCON 1 was not a level he could talk his way back out of. He needed action. Swift, decisive action. Something that would impress Linda and make her want to stay.

But what?

Lightbulb. Money, that's what! Piles of it.

Bills paid. Mortgage gone. New car. New clothes. New dog (bugger it, why not?). Renewed wife.

All he needed to do was press a few buttons, double-click a few links and bada bing bada boom, he was a wealthy man.

With more resolution than he had felt since his brief stint at art school, Dereck spun in his chair and faced down his not-broken monitor. He pressed the button. It turned on.

*THIS SESSION HAS TIMED OUT.
FOR SECURITY REASONS, YOU HAVE BEEN LOGGED OUT.
TO ACCESS YOUR ACCOUNT AGAIN, PLEASE LOG BACK IN.*

Ah.