

TOM HAS TWO WALLETS

My neighbor, Victor, stopped me in the stairwell.

“Wait a minute, Tom, I have something for you.” He ducked into his apartment and returned moments later holding a black wallet. “I believe this is yours.” He handed it to me.

I looked at it, incredulous. It *was* my wallet. I took a quick inventory and found my Bank of America credit card was missing, as was my Amazon Visa card. My American Express and other Visa cards were still there, as was my driver’s license. There had been about fifty dollars in it the night before, and only fifteen dollars remained. My business card, with my phone number, sat in a pocket. A curiously discriminating thief, I reflected. Why didn’t he call me? And why did he return it to it to *Victor*? It wasn’t like we were buddies – how did he know to contact me through Victor?

“Where did you get this?” I asked.

“A man on the street gave it to me.”

This was weird. Who was he?

I went to my apartment and began the tedious task of cancelling my credit cards, and wondering why I carried so many pieces of plastic. Then, out of the corner of my eye, I noticed something on the kitchen countertop. I looked closer, surprise turning to curiosity. It was my wallet. I turned to my home office desk. No, I hadn’t imagined it. Another – identical – wallet sat there. However, the one on the countertop contained all my credit cards and money. They both contained identical driver’s licenses.

What did it mean? I went to Victor again, and asked: “Did you know the man who gave you this?”

“Armando, I think,” he said after a moment’s thought. “I never saw him before.”

I went outside and looked around, using the vague description I had gotten from Victor. It was no use, however. If the man had wanted meet me, he could have called me. I vaguely recalled having lost my wallet a year ago – but where had it been all this time? Where had this fellow Armando found it – and why did he let over a year pass before he returned it?

Half-expecting Rod Serling to appear, saying something like, “Picture if you will a man named Tom Soter, who thought he had lost a wallet but instead found it in *The Twilight Zone*.”

In fact, the wallet’s return wasn’t the only strange thing that had happened to me in the last few days. The day before, I had been out with some friends after performing in Sunday Night Improv, my long-running comedy show. I happened to have a copy of my latest book on hand called *Stolen Memories*, and I wanted to read them a selection. I opened to the middle of the volume and found myself disoriented. At first I thought a page was missing. It wasn’t. The entire book was printed backwards. Page 206 was page 1, 207 was page 2, and so on. That was crazy! Was I in *The Shining*? *Redrum*.

Was I being paranoid? It was just a coincidence, right? Right. That’s what someone always asks nervously in *The X-Files* before he is killed in some gruesomely horrible way. It’s too late for the hapless victim when FBI agent Fox Mulder finds out that the murdered man had inadvertently brought a voodoo curse down on himself when he did something wrong. I thought back. What could I have done? Well, my Metro Card wasn’t working and I was too tired to walk four blocks to my home. So I rode the M60 bus *without paying*. That had to be it. There was no Metro Card in the wallet and the wallet contained fifteen dollars in cash. Was I being warned that I shouldn’t have defied the MTA?

These warning signs usually come in threes, I thought (or was that comedy?) so I would be safe, I reasoned, until I received the third sign? But I had already received it. Again, I thought back: bus and subway incidents.

Was there anything significant that had happened which I had ignored? I thought. And thought. And thought.

Then I had it: the day after buying a monthly MTA Metro Card pass, my card stopped working. The subway clerk told me that the card had gone bad and that I'd have to write for a new one. I decided that was the link that connected all three incidents: the missing Metrocard in my wallet, the defective metrocard... But how did the book fit in? Of course, critics had called my second book, *Disappearing Act* "perfect for passing time on an uptown subway ride." Right! But it wasn't perfect for passing time on a downtown subway ride. That was the connection but what did it mean? That I should pay more attention to uptown subway rides than downtown? Be alert and not read? Or was it downtown that I should be paying attention to because I couldn't read – I had to pay attention?

I thought some more. And then shrugged. Maybe it was just a coincidence?

Two weeks later, I was going out and went into the closet to get a coat. I found a slightly worn leather jacket. It wasn't mine. I had never seen it before. Where had it come from? (*Cue: Twilight Zone* theme and watch out for Rod Serling, smoking a cigarette.)

That occurred at the end of January. But the story wasn't over. In early April, I decided to take a short ride on my bike to the bank to make a deposit. Because of the city-wide lockdown caused by the Covid-19 pandemic, I hadn't been out much. The streets were eerily deserted, reminding me of the eerily deserted Manhattan streets of *The World, the Flesh, and the Devil* (1959). Most of the people I saw were wearing medical masks and gloves, and I thought of another movie, *The Omega Man* (1973), which told the chilling story of a pandemic that destroys the world, transforming those who survive into white-haired zombies determined to kill Charlton Heston (!).

I finished at the bank and went on to the grocery store and when I went to pay, I found that I had lost my wallet! Again! Angry at myself, I spent 20 minutes scanning the street and sidewalk as I retraced my steps. But it was a waste of time. I went back to my apartment and cancelled my credit cards.

A few hours later, the buzzer to the downstairs front door summoned me. "Who is it?" I asked. A crackling, hard-to-understand voice called out my name. I responded, "Who is it? Who's there?" Sensing somehow that this was more than a thief or a crank trying to gain access to the building, I rushed downstairs.

There was no one there. I stepped outside. It was a beautiful day – and then I heard my name. I looked across the street. There was a masked man, wrapped in layers of clothing, and wearing gloves, standing by a car and shouting to me.

"Thomas Soter! Did you lose something today?"

"Yes!!"

He signaled for me to cross the street. I did so and stood a few feet away from the man. He was tall with broad shoulders and seemed otherworldly and mysterious, in his mask and clothing that was draped over him like a robe. He had an accent I couldn't place. I then noticed a small woman, also in a mask and wrapped up in robes like her companion.

"What did you lose?" he asked, as though he were beginning a mantra.

"I lost my wallet!" I said, adding, "It's black."

He gestured to the woman, who produced a white plastic bag, from which she extracted another white plastic bag. My wallet was inside.

The man explained that his companion, who spoke no English, had seen the wallet slip out of my jacket pocket as I rode by her on my bike. They had been searching for me ever since, even tracking down a Tom Soter who lived in Chicago. I was impressed. Who was this pair and why had they gone to all this trouble for a stranger? I offered the woman \$20 as a reward. She initially refused, shaking her head and speaking in a language that was unfamiliar to me. After I insisted, she finally accepted it.

"You should be careful," said her partner as he opened the door of the car. "These are dangerous

times.”

Indeed! I suddenly felt a familiar feeling. Who was this masked man and his faithful sidekick? Could they be seeking justice for the innocent? Were they fighting for law and order?

But it was too late. Like another masked man of my youth, he was gone before I could ask him who he was.

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