

Mastering Money Podcast

Season 9 – Dark side of money

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S9 E04: Surviving the Shadows – Street Crimes and Robbery

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DORETTA THOMPSON

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Hi. You're listening to Mastering Money, where we explore the many aspects of good financial decision making. I'm Doretta Thompson, financial literacy leader for Chartered Professional Accountants of Canada. We provide no-cost programs and free online resources that help Canadians own their finances and learn the language of money.

This season, we're looking at the dark side of money. We'll be diving into hot button topics like how romance scams target vulnerable people, how we can protect ourselves and deal with the aftermath of robbery with the sharp increase in street crimes, to the fraudulent property sales that jeopardize our homes.

In this episode, we're looking at the emotional and financial impact of theft. What happens if you're unlucky enough to have your credit cards and IDs stolen? We'll take a look at how these are actually organized crimes and explore how to protect yourself and how to reclaim your identity.

My guest today is someone who has been there and done that, Li Zhang, director of financial literacy here at CPA Canada. Li, welcome to Mastering Money.

LI ZHANG

00:01:23.04

Thank you for having me today.

DORETTA THOMPSON

00:01:25.63

So before we begin, can you tell us a little bit about yourself and what you do at CPA Canada?

LI ZHANG

00:01:32.81

Well, I am very blessed to work on the CPA Financial Literacy Program that obviously produces this particular podcast among community programs, digital content. And as well, I work on our Indigenous initiatives, one of which being the Indigenous mentorship program for students.

A little bit about me, I came to Canada when I was four and a half. So I've spent obviously my most formative years in Canada. But I find as an individual, I carry a little bit of both Eastern and Western philosophies. So I think it's a little interesting bit about me.

DORETTA THOMPSON

00:02:19.68

Thanks for sharing that and all the amazing work that you've done on this program that you've been with our Fin Lit Program right from the very beginning. So I mentioned at the outset that you have literally been through this experience. And for our listeners, I was there when the theft happened. So this is a very personal experience and exploration for us. And I really hope that by sharing this story, you're really bringing that sort of personal insight into what can happen to people because this happens all too often. So tell us the story.

LI ZHANG

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Well, I think it's interesting. Of course, I'll go through the timeline of the incident. But I'm really lucky because I work in this area of financial literacy, so when this theft occurred, it was a really great opportunity for me to dive into this and to really learn about it, hoping that there was an opportunity like this to really kind of share my experiences because I had the time to do that.

And it's so important to know that depending on your situation or your economic circumstance, we don't always have the ability and the time or the knowledge to really truly understand and to solve these issues. So what I'm hoping today is really to share some of the learnings that I took away from this as well as the steps that I did. Even with all this information and years of being in financial literacy, there were still things I learned and still things that I would recommend should this happen to you.

And I think as we begin to live more digital lives, these things are going to occur a lot more, and especially when you look at some of the real economic challenges that so many people are facing. Theft is unfortunately one of the consequences of our times. And so if you're listening to this, and something's happened to you, or hopefully nothing has, and you keep it in your back pocket to say, OK, if this were to happen to me, and I was unlucky, I know exactly what to do. Or come back to this podcast and listen to it again and say, OK, now I have a plan of action.

In the description, I hope we'll put in some key numbers and contacts should you need them. OK, so the story. And I do think it's funny that your lovely host, Doretta, was the individual I was actually at the coffee shop with when this occurred. So around 10:45 — and I have all the times because I obviously needed it to report the crime — but at 10:45 in the morning, I walk into a coffee shop. Doretta is already there.

I leave my belongings, I think a laptop bag, et cetera. And I go and get what I would now think is the most expensive tea latte I have ever ordered in my life. And I had wallet in my pocket that I had taken out. Now, it's not a really big wallet. It's one of those small ones that carries all your cards. I think this is kind of important for the visual aspect.

And I took my wallet out, tapped with my credit card, put my card back, put it back in my pocket, and zipped the pocket. Now, this pocket would have been on my right side at the top of my coat. So I sit down, and I drape my jacket over the chair. And Doretta and I proceed to have a lovely chat. And we had our laptops out, so we were obviously working.

And time continues. Nothing seems to be amiss. At 12:35, we had finished the meeting, and I am leaving the coffee shop. And I pick up my phone, and I hadn't looked at it in that almost two-hour span of time because I always think when you're sitting in front of someone, it's a little rude to be glancing at your phone all the time. But I noticed there was a \$20 charge from a pharmacy.

Interesting because obviously, I had not left the coffee shop at this time. And I'm thinking and going through the different scenarios in my mind. But I don't share my credit card with anybody. I mean —

DORETTA THOMPSON

00:06:58.18

Can I just interrupt for a second? So when you looked at it, and you saw that there was that charge to your card, what is it you had on your phone that let you see that right away? Because I think that's important because a lot of people don't know they can do that on their phones.

LI ZHANG

00:07:15.92

So I mean, this is not my first rodeo. I have had my credit card stolen, not in this physical manner but in a digital format. So perhaps you used it, and someone scans or skims the card as they say. Or I some online shopping, et cetera, and that information gets lost. So this is not the first time that my credit card information had been stolen.

So what I've done is — I think it depends on your bank, but my bank offers the ability to send you a notification. So it's a push notification every time you use your credit card. So I get that whether I use the card physically, online, or if I'm using my phone to tap for that purchase. And it gives me a peace of mind. It gets a bit annoying because obviously, you're there.

You're spending the money, and then your phone kind of dings and say, hello, hi, you've spent this money. But for me, it was a peace of mind to know in case this were to happen. So the notification was that I had used one of my credit cards at a pharmacy. Now, I don't share this card with anybody in my family. I know some families will share credit cards for different types of purchases.

But this is how irrational sometimes you get in these moments where you're just hoping that something bad did not actually occur. So the first thing I do is actually call my husband and ask him if he used my card at the pharmacy, which is totally strange since I didn't give him my card nor did he have access to it. But that was, again, my first knee-jerk reaction.

And then the next thing I did was get my wallet. Now, my wallet was still in my pocket. So I take out the wallet, and it feels a little light.

DORETTA THOMPSON

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And was the pocket still zipped?

LI ZHANG

00:09:19.64

The pocket was zipped. The wallet was there. But something is wrong, right? And you know because your, like, sixth sense kicks in, and you're just like, OK. This is the moment. And I take out all the cards, and it is very apparent that I'm missing my credit cards, of which there were three in my wallet, as well as my driver's license, which, out of everything that was lost, that was actually my biggest concern. And we'll get to that a little later on why.

So now it's sunk in that I have been physically robbed. And you know, I'm literally standing maybe two feet from the entrance of the coffee shop at this point, OK? So it's a busy road. I look like a crazy person, probably looks like I'm having a moment. And the first thing I do is I quickly log in to my online banking because a lot of those any charges that were going through would be pending on my account.

And then I noticed the large numbers. So all of a sudden, there's \$4,100 pending at another pharmacy. I start looking at the other ones, and there's \$2,100, \$22, \$10. Clearly none of these charges were mine because I had been sitting in this coffee shop, with you, in that period of time.

And so now it's sunk in — to be fair, I'm still trying to justify it in my mind in an irrational way. I want to mention that because that's where your mind goes. You're like, oh, well, maybe it's a wrong charge. Something's happened. And then you need to tell yourself, no, you've been robbed. Period. You need to do all the things.

And so my first thing to do was to, in my online banking, look for the fraud number. There's a number of names that it could be. Sometimes it's your credit card services. Sometimes it's report a fraud, report a theft. It really depends on what your particular bank has. Now, why is this important is sometimes when you're looking online for something, that number can be wrong.

And I know it sounds really scary because I think we're all trained to trust things like Google, what it tells you. But sometimes, if you've really been targeted, they can figure out a way how to spoof those numbers, either to call you or when you look up those numbers, it gives you a fake number. And so it's really important to figure out what that number is. A lot of times, it's even on the credit card.

But obviously, in this case, I don't have those cards. So I went through my online banking because now I'm bordering on acceptance but extreme paranoia. That is absolutely my frame of mind right now because I think everybody on the street is out to get me. So I call. And it was not the greatest experience. I'm not going to lie. I think I ended up talking to three people. And at this point, I'm like, I need to walk home.

So I'm actually on the way home as well on the phone trying to have my credit cards canceled. And it takes probably the entire walk home, which would have been maybe 25 minutes for me to get through because I had Visa cards and Mastercards. And depending on who you talk to, sometimes they're different departments, so you have to deal with one card and then the next card and then ensure that they've been canceled.

So I get home, and I'm still in panic mode. There's no question. I'm still in part shock. So my husband comes home, and he's like, well, is there anything I can do? I said, I think I have to report this as a crime. So could you look it up for me online how I report a crime? I have never had to report a crime. I've never even dialed 911, really, in my life. So this is all very new to me.

So he sends me a link. And I love my husband dearly, but he probably should read more carefully, because in this case, it was fraudulent charges above \$5,000, you have to call them. Actually, there's an online form, but you can't actually submit it. Every jurisdiction, I think, is a little bit different. To be transparent, this happened in the city of Toronto. So in Toronto, if it's above \$5,000, you can't use their online form.

So I found the non-emergency line for the Toronto police to report it. They were lovely, I have to say. Someone did the initial intake with me. We went through the details. And then they said, we're going to call you tomorrow or today — this was, I think, a Friday that it happened — to get the details.

And so Saturday comes along, and they in fact call me. Then with all the information I provided — because they did ask me, I had to call my credit card company and have a list of all the charges that were fraudulent, where they were committed, at what times because they had to do an investigation. And then once they started that investigation, I would be given or assigned a detective on my case who specializes in financial crimes.

Meanwhile, after I had that initial call on the Friday, you know, I'm literally sitting at my house, giving myself a moment. And think this is really important because you're going to replay everything that happened and think, what could I have done to prevent this moment? And it is really hard, I think, for anybody to just accept that you have been victimized. This has nothing to do with you. In this case, I became a target and a mark.

And it took me a while, and I know Doretta will be able to say that probably for a week, I was border on paranoid. Like, I would go on the subway, and I wouldn't want to stand next to people even though nothing has ever happened to me on public transportation. But it's this feeling that you were violated because someone went close to you and took something physically from you.

And so I had a really tough time processing the fact that it happened to me. And so I gave myself some time, and then I said, OK, so now what do I do? I said, I've taken care of the credit cards piece. There's still some things I have to do with that side because I obviously also didn't want to be on the hook for these charges.

And I will explain a little later on how that actually can occur despite the fact that your credit cards obviously have insurance built into them. But for me, it was important at this point to almost reassert my control over my life. And so I thought, OK, so my driver's license was stolen. This is a problem because — I don't know if everybody knows this, but your driver's license number is something that also does not change, much like your SIN number or your social insurance number.

So when you look at your driver's license and your SIN numbers that don't change, it's really important that you protect them because you will not be issued a new one. So with that, identity theft can occur. So the first thing I did was I actually called ServiceOntario, and I said, well what do I do. Do I report that it was stolen?

And they told me I had to go through the credit bureaus for that, that I would not be issued a new number. That's just not something that happen. So that afternoon, during a workday, and I called Doretta, and I said this happened. I think she felt a little bit guilty because this was a coffee shop she frequented, full transparency here. So I said, look, there's no way I'm going to be useful for the rest of this afternoon. So I'm going to go wait in line and get my driver's license.

And for me, it was just about reestablishing control over myself. And then in the meantime, I started calling the credit bureaus. Now, I already have alerts set up, but for those who are calling, I think it's important. Any time you have lost pieces of identity or even concern that someone is going to misuse your identity, you can place what's called an alert on your credit file with the credit bureau.

So in Canada, there are two, one's Equifax, and one's TransUnion. Both of them operate a little bit differently, and they're all very paper-based. So you're going to call them, and you're going to say, look, I've had pieces of my identity stolen. I'd like you to put an alert on my file. What that means, though, is that even if you as that individual want to apply for a line of credit, credit card, a mortgage, it is definitely a lot more hoops you have to jump through because you have that alert.

Because a financial institution is going to get that alert when they submit your application for a credit check, even if maybe you're renting a house or an apartment, same thing happens. They have to triple check your identity. It can be onerous to go through. But if you are concerned that your identity could be misused, I highly recommend that you do that.

On a side note, everything that you don't do always comes back to haunt you in the end. So in my case, my name is very common. And so oftentimes, my file can be merged with other people's, because how a credit bureau works is that they're holders of information and data that is reported to them.

So if you take out a loan, finance a car, that information is sent to them, and they collect it. But if it's incomplete, oftentimes your credit file could also be incomplete. So they don't know that you had an address changed if you don't tell them or if they don't have any documentation that shows your address has changed, your place of work.

Any credit applications that you've put through that you did not put in your SIN number may be left out of your credit report. So one thing you do want to do is every year or at least frequently check that all your information is correct. Because even with alerts, if your information is not correct, they won't know to tell you as an individual that someone is misusing your identity.

So in my case, I had not only deal with the alerts, but I also had to go through a very onerous process of correcting everything that was on my credit reports because I clearly left it too long since the last time I had to do it, and then now it just compounded. And everything takes about 30 days. And right now, I'm still in the throes of paranoia.

So these are all things, again, you're going to have to do one after the other. And when I spoke to my detective at the Toronto Police, he actually asked whether or not I had gone and done those things. And obviously, I had, but again, I can't stress enough the time it takes to do something like this. It is not something that is very quick.

And so the best way to protect yourself before something like this happens — and I hope it never will — is to make sure that a lot of your information is correct. So when you have the time now to make sure that you don't have to go through that rigmarole of sending faxes. Who still faxes? I'm going to tell you, TransUnion does.

And what's even more difficult is they're like, well, we need ID with address. OK. Well, I don't have my driver's license. There are very few IDs, if you think about it, that actually has your name, your date of birth, and your address on it. The Passport is just your picture and your name. It doesn't have some of those information. So it gets really interesting where I call them, and I said, well, I need to update my TransUnion file. You have an old address.

They're like, OK, well, you need to send a driver's license. I said, well, that's a problem because my driver's license got stolen. And then you're stuck in this hamster wheel of you can't submit the application to change your information because you don't have it, so you have to wait for that information before you can do something else. So it gets very complicated. So that was that.

The other piece I found really worrisome was when I first called my credit card company, they told me that the perpetrators had used my PIN. This is concerning because a PIN number is interesting because it's something that's not stored on your card. And this was why PIN numbers were instituted, because when you're skimming a card, you get the number, you get the expiration date, you get the security code in the back, et cetera.

But the pin is actually housed where they have to seek approval. So I'm going to assume kind of a server in the middle. But apparently, they had access to my PIN. Now, I haven't used my PIN in months because I'm not making charges that require me to put in my card and put in my PIN number. So now my super paranoia is kicking in, and I'm thinking, oh my god, have they been stalking me for three months where they were able to access my pin?

And then the credit card company starts asking me questions. These questions are important because sometimes they will make your insurance invalid, which means that I would be on the hook to pay for what is now almost \$7,000 of fraudulent charges. So they ask me questions like, is your PIN easy to guess? Nope, not. They're just four random numbers, not related to my year of birth — I guess that's a popular one — or my birthday.

And then they asked me, did you write your PIN number down? And my answer to that was, where? So as it turns out, there are certain individuals who will write the PIN number on the card itself or in a piece of paper they leave in their wallet. If you are listening and are someone who is doing that, please destroy those elements immediately because it will void your insurance.

And in some cases, your credit card company will say, you haven't done enough to protect that information. And therefore, you're partly to blame for these fraudulent transactions. Because when I spoke to the detective assigned to my case, one of the questions he asked me was, will your credit card be covering these charges?

And in my mind, I didn't know that was an option, that they could say, oh, well, you're on the hook for this money spent. So I got a bit concerned going, is that possible? And he's like, it is. And it has happened to others. So now this just adds another layer of stress because I'm starting now to think, well, is there anything I have done that allowed this to occur?

Because \$7,000 is a lot of money. I don't want to be on the hook for that. So luckily, that didn't happen. But this is also why it's important to file a police report, because my credit card companies also asked me, did you file a police report? And if you did, you need to call us back with the case number because their fraud department will reach out to the police involved to get the information because they also have to do their due diligence.

That's why it can take several weeks to several months before you'll get a call back from the fraud department of the various credit card companies to tell you what their final decision is. So even if they've removed the charges from your credit card, it is possible they'll come back and say, we're putting it back on because in fact, you are liable for these charges.

DORETTA THOMPSON

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That's a scary thought. So when you think about it, and you think back to the experience, the sort of immediate steps you want people to think about and to go through are first of all, one of the preventative steps that you can take is to have that service from the bank that alerts you every time a charge has been made to your card. And I have a similar service as well.

And I know that you were — because I remember this, the pings were starting to come in as they were moving very quickly. And we can get into that in a few minutes when we talk about that this is not an opportunistic thing. This is not somebody that happened to see your wallet and take it. This was very deliberate. It was skillfully done. And the sort of sad thing I would note is that I'm sitting on the other side of the table with my bag wide open with my wallet, et cetera, inside it.

So the first thing, make sure that you have that warning on your card. Then you want to call the credit card security and get those cards canceled. Get them canceled right away and make sure that you are not googling for that number but that you are actually either calling the number that is on your credit card, or you go to online banking directly. You do not Google it, just as a safety precaution.

The next thing is you want to report it to the police, and they will give you a certain amount of guidance. Following that, one of the things you're going to be asked for is that list of transactions and the times. And fortunately, your bank cards will provide you with that information. That is information that you can access in your own account. If other identity cards, et cetera — in your case, your driver's license — were stolen, you need to get that dealt with right away.

And finally, the credit bureaus. And again, the police will warn you about these kinds of things, ask you if you've taken those kinds of steps. So that's a kind of checklist. And it's interesting because from a distance, it sounds like, OK, this is calm. I can do it. 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6. But it's that feeling of violation you have that turns into paranoia, et cetera, that people — it's very hard to prepare somebody for until it's happened to you.

LI ZHANG

00:30:01.38

No, for sure. There's very few occasions in my life that you have this horrible sense of dread and paranoia about every person you meet. I mean, they only took stuff. I can't imagine what it would be like if this was an armed robbery or something where your life is in question. And I very much felt violated. And that's the only word that suits in my case.

And even now, I'm very cognizant of where I put my wallet. And in many cases, I no longer bring it with me. So if I'm not driving, I don't need any of those things. And now I've used my phone for a lot of my purchases. Because as you know with the phone, the information is actually encrypted and stored a little differently than it would with a physical credit card. And you generally know where your phone is at all times. Let's be honest, right?

We live in a world where our phone is practically a second kidney. So it's a little harder to be parted with your phone, and there's also other protective elements to it.

DORETTA THOMPSON

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You can wipe it from a distance, for example. If your phone is stolen, you can actually wipe your entire phone remotely.

LI ZHANG

00:31:34.16

So it's strange because I was never that person that would be paranoid in the city that I've spent most of my life in. I mean, I've traveled extensively in the world, and I've never had an incident like this. And it's so, I think, doubly hurtful that it would happen in a place I lived.

And it's perhaps that you let your guard down because you're thinking, oh, these are my neighbors. They're my friends. And so it never occurred to me that I shouldn't drape my coat over my chair. But based on my conversations with the Toronto Police, this is something that happens actually more often than we know.

And in my first conversation, they were very clear that the likelihood of them finding the perpetrators were very low. And the reason is because many of these are criminal rings. So they're from out of town, Canadian but from out of town. And they'll come in from another jurisdiction, steal and commit fraud, and then they will leave. And so there's not much your local police can actually do in this case because they've left the jurisdiction.

So then you're probably sitting there going, OK, well, if the police can't do anything for me, then why do I care to report it? There's a couple of reasons. One is it will help with your case with the credit card companies so they know that it isn't you trying to defraud them as part of the criminal ring, which is absolutely possible and has happened to them.

And secondly, it's perhaps crime can often be about patterns. And so if, let's say, there was an inside source at one of the pharmacies that was helping to make these fraudulent charges, the police are going to start putting that together once they have more than one situation as a comparative.

And so it's important, even though at the end of the day, I can tell you — here's the ending to that story. The Toronto Police called me, and they said, the coffee shop was great. They gave us the video. We could see nothing that indicated a crime had been committed. So they went through that entire two-hour period. And I know it has to have happened during the two hours because I went in with my cards, and I left without them. Nothing else happened in between.

And then they reached out to the different pharmacies. I think there were about four or five in total. So think about how quickly they're moving within a two-hour span. They had to steal my things and then go to different pharmacy locations within that same time frame because I canceled it immediately once I had left that coffee shop just under two hours later. So they reviewed those videos, or they requested them. And the individual stores reviewed them and said that they couldn't find anything.

DORETTA THOMPSON

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And to be clear, these are the videos — so there's two sets of videos we're talking about here. There was the video in the coffee shop where nothing could be seen. And that's really interesting because as you said, it's my sort of neighborhood coffee shop, and I know the owner. And he just told me he too had looked through, and we were sitting where there was a camera. And you just couldn't see anything. You just couldn't. So that's one set of videos. But the other set of videos you're talking about are the videos of the actual transactions at the pharmacies.

LI ZHANG

00:35:31.39

Correct. So these would be the moments where my credit cards were fraudulently used. But each individual store reported that they didn't find anything incriminating at those points. So it begs the question, how did they spend — I mean, these are pharmacies, right? So how can you possibly spend \$4,100, \$2,700, \$3,000, and no one going, hey, that's a lot of money that you're spending in a pharmacy.

So that's why I go back to this point of it's so important to report it because there will be a pattern that emerges because there are some stores that are perhaps more relaxed in their security, in their protocols, et cetera. Because what I would learn later when the credit card company's fraud alert department would call me to tell me was that, in fact, my PIN was not used, right?

Which was very interesting because I was told at the very beginning that my PIN numbers were used in these transactions. Because as you know, after a certain limit — and I think it depends on your card — you are required to put in a PIN number. So they were not used, and they were signed for. So I think that gave me a little peace of mind in terms of that this occurred.

Now, I would think that the conversations between the stores or the pharmacies in question and the credit card companies could be interesting because they're probably going to decide who was liable because stores in Canada are actually not supposed to be accepting signed receipts for charges, that they in fact must put the card in and put the PIN in.

And I found that interesting because some cards, one in particular, they tried to put a PIN number, and it was declined. So in fact, I think some stores are saying, well, hey, that's \$3,000. You can't just, like, sign for that anymore, versus other stores that are more relaxed. So even these criminals have to know which stores and which individuals are more relaxed than others.

And if you've ever watched any of these movies where the person who steals the things are not the same person who transports them, who's not the same person who uses them, right? So in fact, you're dealing with multiple individuals and not just the one person who stole from you.

DORETTA THOMPSON

00:38:12.72

That's really fascinating, that in that two hours — because I think it was only a two-hour period between the time that you kind sat down with the last charge to your credit card that was your own charge and the time that you realized the error, you realized what was happening and canceled the cards. All of this happened in this very, very short period of time.

Did you have any sense — you said you were going back and thinking about it — of what happened in the cafe? Like, was there anything that you should have been aware of or that would suggest to people to keep their eyes open for?

LI ZHANG

00:38:48.60

Yes is the answer to that. Like I said, when you're victimized, you replay everything in your head and nauseam. And to now — and this happened months ago, as you know — I can tell you everybody that I interacted with in the coffee shop. And something I had to remember for my incident report — which apparently was highly detailed, and the detective commented on that. But I think the lesson I learned here is always trust your gut, and I'll elaborate on that.

So when I walked in, and I sat my things down, my first thought was, boy, these tables are really close together. Because you were sitting on the bench side of things, and I was facing into the store in a chair, and there was a table directly behind me. Like, so close, if I were to like put my hand back, I'd touch the other table very easily. Or even my chair was almost touching that other table.

And I remember thinking that. But I thought, maybe there were trying different ways to rearrange the store to maximize how many people could sit at the coffee shop at one time. And then of course, I remember the two Asian ladies who were having a very animated conversation next to us, but they were not close enough to have been able to take my wallet, go through it, and be selective.

Because they left me my debit card, I had my NEXUS card in there because I just got back from a trip, and left my health card and all these things and just took, like I said, the three credit cards and the one driver's license. Put it back and then zipped up my pocket. So clearly, they had time and access.

And so I made a note of the individuals who sat at the table behind us because there was a really brief, I would say, five minutes of when I used the bathroom. And I came back, and I remember seeing two cups of coffee, one young lady sitting there, and an empty chair, which I thought was interesting because I thought, oh, OK, it seemed like they newly sat down, et cetera.

So I remember those type of details. But I think if I were to take anything away from that is if something feels uncomfortable, take a moment to ask yourself why. And if you are uncomfortable, change the situation, right? In my case, maybe I should have taken my wallet out of my pocket and put it on the table where I could see it as opposed to leaving it draped on my chair in a pocket that I thought was safe because it was zipped.

DORETTA THOMPSON

00:41:50.71

I think another learning there is also the importance of writing down in detail immediately so that you're capturing those thoughts and those memories very quickly because you're going to be asked for those for the police report, et cetera.

LI ZHANG

00:42:05.66

Especially when your adrenaline is running, it's amazing everything that you remember and pick up in that moment.

DORETTA THOMPSON

00:42:14.12

Do you have any sort of thoughts or insights to share about that period of coping with the psychological impact of it? I've had my credit card information stolen, as I think many of us have. That's something that — I mean, it was annoying, but it got fixed, and I can't say that I felt particularly violated.

But I've had my apartment burgled. That's a whole different thing. Even though I wasn't there, you feel really violated. But to have something stolen off your person, that is, I think, kind of a nightmare. So what advice do you have on how to cope with that psychologically?

LI ZHANG

00:42:54.74

I think you need to first accept that it happened to you and to address it because it's really easy to just kind of shove it underneath a carpet and say, whatever, I'm moving on with my life. And you don't really go through the very complex emotions because I really believe if you don't deal with very serious emotions — and that can be anything that happens to you in life — you will live with those consequences.

And I have some actual examples of that in my own life where something quite traumatic happened to me, and I just chose to ignore it. And then the problem is, it just becomes a fabric of your identity, and you continuously wear it because you haven't thought it through and then put it to bed and just left it behind you. So I think definitely let yourself feel, talk to someone. If that's going to help, write it down. Find what it is that is your coping mechanism.

And then the other piece is, don't worry about the things you have no control over, right? I've done, at this point, everything I can. I went through the very tough process of updating all my information with the credit bureaus. I filed a police report. I did everything that I knew to do. And being in the field, I also called some friends who are fraud experts. And I said, look, this happened to me. I've done this. Is there anything else that I'm missing?

And so having them give me their perspective gave me a peace of mind too to think, OK, so there's not some glaring hole that I'm missing that I should have done and in hindsight didn't. But at the end of the day, if my identity is stolen later on — and that's always possible. I hate to say it out loud, but there is a whole other business of selling stolen identities.

So these aren't even the original people who stole your information. They've sold it for whatever amount is the going rate to somebody else who will use it for their other nefarious purposes. But I won't know that. And you know, as we increasingly live digital lives, a lot of your information is going to be out there in one form or another.

And so understanding how to protect yourself from all sorts of fraud, not in this case where this was a robbery but even how they skim information about you online. So think about the information that you are putting about yourself online because that can also come back one day to haunt you. But for me, it's this idea of, OK, this happened. I need to be more vigilant.

And if something doesn't feel right, I need to address it immediately but not to worry about it until it happens because then I would never leave my house. I would never open my computer, and I would never visit another website or buy anything. And I don't think that is a way to live. And to know that I was just very unlucky in this situation, right? And I know you have the Patron Saint of — I think, Saint Nicholas, isn't it — of Lost Items because you lose things all the time.

DORETTA THOMPSON

00:46:24.42

Saint Anthony.

LI ZHANG

00:46:25.17

Saint Anthony. And your stuff is always returned to you. But in this case, you're lucky that you didn't meet someone who had ulterior motives or who wanted to commit fraud. Like, average people are nice. If they find a wallet, they're going to say, oh, if this happened to me, I would want someone to return this and to figure out a way how to return that missing item. But in this case, I was targeted. I was marked.

And it sucks, but I'm lucky that I was able to kind of see this through to the end and have really interesting conversations throughout with the individuals who were helping me through this. So I am very grateful for that and also to be able to provide content to hopefully help someone else through this process and also to give feedback.

I gave feedback to everybody throughout this process, what I thought could be better with the credit bureaus, what I thought could be better with the credit card companies when I was going through reporting the fraudulent charges, et cetera. Because I thought, well, I have the time to really dig into this, so let me give them feedback on what I think would be more helpful the next person that calls in to share a similar story.

And the other thing is, even someone like myself who has grown up in Canada who works in this field, I was nervous calling the police. I'm not going to lie. Right? And I think it's important to say that — and I know there's a lot of difficulties with many jurisdictions with the police. But in this case, they were really compassionate, really understanding, and took the time to follow up with me and to explain to me everything that was happening, what they were doing, what they couldn't do.

And in this case, they can't move forward with my file because there is no evidence of a crime other than the fact that someone spent \$7,000. But there was no video evidence of any persons known to them or unknown to them. So for this purposes, you know, this is the end of that story. I do not have to pay back the \$7,000, but there was also no one who has to answer for this particular crime.

And luckily again, it was just things that were taken from me and nothing more, and I think there's more to life than things. But it was still for me a really tough situation to go through because it, again, never has happened to me anywhere. And even in my own backyard, there's a part of me that — I think that's the part that mourns the most that this happened to me at home, right?

And so I really hope that it doesn't happen to you, to lovely people who are listening to this. But the truth of it is there's going to be a percentage of us who will be.

DORETTA THOMPSON

00:49:46.45

Any final advice or words of wisdom?

LI ZHANG

00:49:50.22

I will end with a comedy of errors piece. And this could happen to people who obviously report that their credit cards are fraudulent, and they get canceled. So as part of the automated system, the credit cards will be regenerated. So the moment you cancel it, they will regenerate a number, and they will assign that number. And then that credit card has to be made in your name with that number.

In your heightened sense of paranoia, the first thing you're going to think is, oh my god, it's happening. Someone has stolen my identity and opened credit cards in my name. That is, in fact, not the case. It is just your credit card company going, you have a new number, and we're emailing you because this is the email that's on file.

But again, I called and said, oh my god, I think this is happening. My identity has been compromised, which in fact, no, this is just automated. But clearly, credit card companies have not thought through what that would feel like if, in fact, it was your identity that was also compromised in this case, right? Because one of the things you're worried about is they're going to open credit products in your name.

The other piece to this, because it continues, right? Because when it rains, it pours. I was visiting my in-laws when I get a call from the doctor's office or something. Now, I generally don't pick up numbers I don't know because, gosh, scam calls. I don't know how many you get in a day. I get tons. But for some reason — and I'm going to say the fates spoke as you would share — and I picked up this call, and it's this nice lady from a doctor's office who says, I think I have your credit cards.

DORETTA THOMPSON

00:51:41.62

What?

LI ZHANG

00:51:43.33

Exactly. And I'm just like, oh dear god. Where are you? Why do you have my credit cards? And remember that in Canada, you can't open other people's mail? That's actually a crime. So she's like, well, it feels like cards. It has your name on it, and this is the address. Well, it turns out that my local branch is in the same building, because the first thing I do is I Google this address, right? I'm like, this is it now. Now my identity is stolen, OK? So that's my second roller coaster ride.

But I Googled the address, and I noticed, oh, wait. That's the branch that's closest to me. So what happened was when they were delivering my new cards to the branch, which is something they have to do if your information has been compromised, they don't like to deliver it to your house. And then you would go pick it up, you show ID, et cetera.

But again, in that moment, I was like, oh my gosh. This is it. My identity has been compromised. But no, this was just a mailing error, but it ended up at this nice lady's doctor clinic in the same building of my local branch.

So what I'm trying to say is, take a moment, don't freak out. You'll be fine. Just make sure that you go through and do all the steps you need to. And as a preventative, like Doretta shared, think about some of the things that you could already be doing to make victimizing you harder, right? You don't need it to make it easy for those criminal masterminds, as we'll call them.

And then it's OK if it happens to you. Go through these steps. Make sure that you're covered. And when your credit cards are reissued, when they're sent to a wrong address, it's OK. It's not yet identity theft. Those would be my parting words.

DORETTA THOMPSON

00:53:49.68

Well, thank you so much. And I know how hard this was and what an experience it is to go through. And I hope our listeners have learned some practical things but also take some comfort in the fact that, yep, it can happen. And this too will pass.

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00:54:55.43