

Caught in the grandparent scam

Brian Keelan - August 2022

It's 11 a.m. and I am working on a writing project in my home office. The home phone rings, and I pick it up without bothering to look and see who is calling.

"Hi, Grampa."

I am a little puzzled. It's not my blood grandson; the only one who calls me Grampa. So, I ask, "Who is this?"

"It's me. Your grandson."

It sounds like Jamie, who at best could be called my step-grandson. However, he is a close friend of my grandson, and he and Jamie have just spent the weekend camping. I say, "Jamie?" because the voice sounds like it could be Jamie, although I don't think I've ever talked to him on the phone before: just when he comes down to visit with his dad and my daughter who have been living together for the last 10 or so years. As a result, I have gotten to know – and come to love – Jamie and his dad a lot.

So, here I am listening to Jamie tell me that he's got a cold and a runny nose, and it occurs to me that maybe his dad has asked him to call me to talk about COVID. I had tested positive for COVID two weeks earlier. At first, I had thought it was just a cold... with the same symptoms he had just described. You may remember that last month, I had written about my trip to Lake Superior with my friend Richard to watch the sauna cabin get taken into the raging waters of the Steel River. Two weeks ago, I was supposed to go back up there for the annual 10-day fishing camp that a bunch of the boys went up for every year. The day before we were supposed to leave, I decided to get a COVID test... just in case.

When I did that, I was surprised and disappointed to have tested positive and had to cancel the trip. Sylvia, who had the same cold symptoms, had tested negative. Although we were triple-vaxxed and just days away from becoming eligible for our fourth shot and we slept in the same bed, I tested positive every day while she tested negative.

This whole COVID thing has been much discussed throughout my entire family and that is what I initially thought Jamie was calling me for. As our discussion continued, he told me that he had tested negative and so far, I am buying into this whole phone call.

Then Jamie told me that he was calling to ask me for a favour.

"What can I do for you?" I asked.

"Well," he said. "I went to the drug store with my friend this morning. He picked me up in his brother's car and we had an accident in the parking lot."

I figured, Okay. He's been in a car accident, and he doesn't want to call his dad or my daughter. That's what the whole Grampa thing is about. He needs a friend.

"Go on," I said.

"Well, it wasn't a very big accident. Just a fender bender. But when the police came and my friend gave them the ownership, it turned out that his brother has several warrants out for his arrest on drug-trafficking charges. Once the cops realized that they decided to search the car and when they did, they found ten pounds of marijuana."

I said, "Well that just goes to show you that your pal's brother is a moron. But how is that your problem?"

"Well, it's not," he said. "But now that they have an all-points bulletin out on his brother, they want this whole thing kept under wraps until they catch him so, they are going to hold me in custody until that happens... unless I can come up with a personal surety bond of \$8,000 which they will return to me after they catch him. So, I'm just here making my one phone call and I didn't want to get my dad involved in this and I was wondering if maybe you could help me out?"

"To the tune of eight grand?" I asked.

"Can I let you talk to the police officer who arrested me?" Jamie asked.

"Sure."

After a few seconds of being on hold, a voice declares, "This is Constable Wiggins. Is this Jamie's grandfather?"

"Sort of," I replied. "More like his step-grandfather. What's going on?"

"Well sir, we've apprehended a car belonging to a man with several warrants out for his arrest. We need to hold both the boys in custody until we round up the owner of the car and clear this thing up. Your grandson looks like a nice boy, and I am sure he is innocent of any of the matters involved here so this will just be a formality. If we have the \$8,000 as security, we will let him go and trust him to stay quiet about all of this until we get the suspect apprehended. You will also need to keep your silence about this matter until we bring this case to a conclusion."

The hair is standing up on the back of my neck as I tell him, "I understand. So, how do we do this. A bank draft?"

"No sir. This must be cash."

"Cash!" I said as alarm bells started going off. "How would that work?" I asked.

Now I need to say that at this point, I am doing a lot of googling on my computer. Do we have an RCMP office here in Sarnia? It turns out we do. They even have a website with a local phone number on it.

I ask the officer to repeat his name and his badge number. He tells me, "Constable Wiggins. Badge number 77652 at detachment # 14382219705."

Now I'm at the Hey... wait a minute stage.

I told him, "Listen Constable Wiggins. I need to make a few phone calls to arrange that kind of money. Give me your number and I'll call you right back."

Constable Wiggins says, "No sir, I cannot do that. This thing is already getting out of hand. My superiors won't allow that. What say I call you back in 15 minutes?"

"All right," I say. "Fifteen minutes it is."

I hung up and called my daughter on my cell phone and asked her, "Where's Jamie?"

"At his girlfriend's place," she said.

I explained to her what had happened and asked her not to say anything to anybody until she was absolutely sure that Jamie was where she thought he was and once she had talked to him and made sure he was safe, to call me back on my cell. That kept my home line open in case Constable Wiggins called back.

Next, I called the local RCMP office and got, "I'm sorry but that number is no longer in service."

That figures, I thought.

So, I went back to Google and found the main RCMP site... in Ottawa, I think.

My daughter called me back and said that she had just spoken to Jamie, and he was fine.

Next, I called the main RCMP number (not even an 800 number) and spoke to the lady who answered and after explaining my problem to her, she asked me to wait while she put me in touch with another lady who made me re-tell my story to her.

She just laughed and said, "Oh, that's the old grandfather scam. Did you record it?"

I said, "No. I don't have a recorder on my phone."

She said, "Well do you have an iPhone?"

"Yes," I replied, "But that's not the phone they called me on."

She said, "I know that. What you should have done is put them on the speaker phone and then just used the memo recorder on your iPhone to record the call."

I told her, "Great idea. That's exactly what I will do the next time something like that happens. Thank you for your service, ma'am."

So then. Here I am again, as my mother used to tell me: "Too soon old and too late smart."

And she also used to say, "The nerve of some people's kids!"

I never heard from Constable Wiggins again.

That night my daughter called and told me that I had been "creeped."

She told me, "The creeps watch Facebook pages. They notice the posts informing you that we have posted something you might be interested in knowing. Quite often we post stuff about the kids. They deduced that Jino and I are married, and that Jamie is our son and thus he is your grandson. They do a little digging to find out about you and then they make the phone call. They think you're some old guy and dumb enough to fall for their BS."

Lucky for me they didn't know what a sharp guy I really am. Otherwise, I might be \$8,000 poorer. I say that in jest because I really believe that the people who do stuff like this are morons and what really bothers me is that they think we are too. But to be fair to all the bad guys out there, they are getting better at the technology end as they boldly walk down their personal road to perdition.

I talked with Officer Sottosanti at the Sarnia Police Department, and he tells me that this is not just a Sarnia thing, "It's like Chickenman... 'He's everywhere, he's everywhere!'"

Officer Sottosanti recommends calling your loved ones and maybe even a few of your not-so-loved ones and telling them to be very careful. I'd call the older folks in my family but there's only one guy in this family older than I am and he's way too smart to fall for the old grandfather scam. I think I'll just call my old pals El Guapo and Woodrowe and tell them I need \$10,000 to get my grandson out of jail. They believe in the Leafs and the Lions.

They'll believe anything. Just make sure you don't. That's not just my opinion either. That's good advice.