It's Never Easy

Over the past couple of months it's seemed like the wireless signal in our house has gotten weaker, like everything else around here, and someone suggested that we probably need a new router. I loved the idea, because it would mean I wouldn't have to figure anything out, because that never ends well. I'd just have to buy something, plug it in, and sail along through the rest of my days on the winds of a powerful wi-fi signal.

I was at the Verizon store when it opened at ten, on Tuesday morning to buy a new router. If you're not first in line, you're screwed, because people don't go to the Verizon store with simple problems, and the wait can be brutal. I soon discovered that I needed to be at the Fios store, Fios being the wireless division of Verizon, which is the cellular telephone company. What the fuck? There's a difference? To me, it's all just things that come through the air, and it's all owned by Verizon.

While the guy was explaining things to me, an angry and elderly customer came in, threw a box containing some device on the counter, shouted "You people are hopeless. I can't deal with you anymore," and stormed out.

The next morning, at ten, I was at the Fios store. Here, I discovered that you can't actually get a router at the Fios store. You can be informed that you need to call Fios, and if they agree that a new router is needed, they'll give you a number so you can return to the store, provide the number, and get your router.

But that isn't exactly how things work. I called Verizon, it being the parent company—hoping they could connect me quickly to Fios—and was told the wait was approximately two hours and thirty minutes, but I could list my number and get a call back, which I did, about three hours later.

The woman I spoke to was a limited English speaker. At first, I thought she was struggling to understand and communicate with me, but after a while I had a feeling that maybe she wasn't trying very hard. It took a long time to explain that my problem was a router, not a cell phone. When she grasped this, she told me she'd put me on hold and transfer me to Fios. I was on hold for

twenty minutes when another woman came on the line saying “Hello, this is Verizon. How may I help you?”

I explained, slowly and clearly, that I'd been talking to someone who was trying to connect me to Fios, but she’d answered instead. She apologized, told me the number for Fios, and asked to put me on hold again while she connected me. I was on hold for twelve minutes. Then the call ended.

I took a break to readjust my attitude. While I was readjusting I got several text messages from Verizon, each asking me how satisfied I’d been with our recent communications. I responded to each of these saying I was not at all satisfied, because the calls kept getting cut off. Then I called the Fios number which probably should have been given to me in the first place.

Thrillingly and miraculously, a human picked up the phone, a really helpful and understanding human.

After looking over the account history, she agreed that we definitely needed a new router. Then she said that, unfortunately, because the new router was an upgrade from the old router it would require a visit from a technician. This was the best news ever. I could trap the technician here and not let him leave until I was sure everything was working.

The guy came two days later, drilled a hole into the side of the house to run a new cable, and got the new router—nice and white—up and running. I felt very proud of myself.

The next day, I asked Alexa to play a song. Her circular light pattern turned red, and she said “I’m having trouble with your signal. Try disconnecting the router, waiting thirty seconds, and plugging it back in.”

There’s an old family story about my mother, from whom I inherited my fear of electrical devices, dropping a fork in the toaster. My father (an electrical engineer) found her as she tried to extract it. She’d put on rubber boots, was using wooden tongs, and had unplugged the toaster. Just to be sure. That’s how I felt about unplugging the router.

But I did it, which involved disconnecting the three wires that attached into the back, unscrewing the cable, and paying attention to where they had been

plugged in—something I often forget to do. I waited a minute, reattached everything, and called out to Alexa "Alexa, play WGBH." Same message as before. Router problem. But worse, the wi-fi signal throughout the house had weakened, and become intermittent. After a few minutes, I couldn't connect to the internet at all. The signal was gone.

A very familiar feeling came over me. A defeated feeling. I had tried to fix a problem, and had made it worse. Obviously, the new router was a lemon, but rather than face the gruesome prospect of trying to contact Fios again, I was tempted to just give up, and live out my remaining days without television or internet. Instead, I launched a fresh assault.

I can't remember what happened next, but there was a series of recorded queries ("Are you calling about paying a bill?") to which I kept saying loudly "Representative." The louder you talk, the better chance you have. I was put on hold a few times, but suddenly, out of the blue, I heard a human voice asking how he could help. He had a lovely accent. I was weeping. I was also terrified that we'd be cut off, and made him promise to call back if this happened, which he did, reassuringly. "I won't leave you, John."

I explained all that had transpired, and he asked me to describe the router, what lights were showing, and where things were plugged in. This was hard to do, made harder by the fact that as I tried to explain, I began getting calls from Verizon, wanting to discuss why I'd been dissatisfied with their service. I couldn't answer them for fear of being cut off from the one guy who seemed to be actually working on my problem. Every time he tried to ask me a question I'd get another incoming call, and I'd have to ask him to repeat the question.

He then performed an amazing trick, which was to turn my phone into a camera, so he could look at and examine whether everything was plugged in properly. A guy somewhere in India actually looking at my router using my phone? Do you understand how this happens? More calls from Verizon kept coming in.

The guy said "Well, try plugging the cord on the left into the socket just above it." Which I did.

Then the call was cut off. He was gone. I sat and stared at the wall for a while, and he didn't call back.

Before retreating to bed, I checked my laptop and was shocked to discover I was connected to wi-fi, with a solid grip. His last suggestion to me, before he disappeared back to India, was brilliant. I'd plugged one of the cords in the wrong place. Now the signal seemed so strong the house was pulsing again.

I slept like a baby, the way you sleep when you've fixed a big problem. Even more satisfying if it's a problem you caused in the first place.

Post Script: A week ago, I got a message that my internet service was about to be shut off because of an unpaid bill. Without internet, of course, I couldn't check my Verizon account to see what was going on, but I knew I'd paid a recent bill. I had no choice but to try to get through by telephone. I'll spare you the details of this lengthy communication effort—you've heard it before—but I finally discovered that while I'd paid Verizon, I hadn't paid Fios in over three months. This is because I haven't gotten a bill from Fios, only from Verizon. Now, everything's up and running.