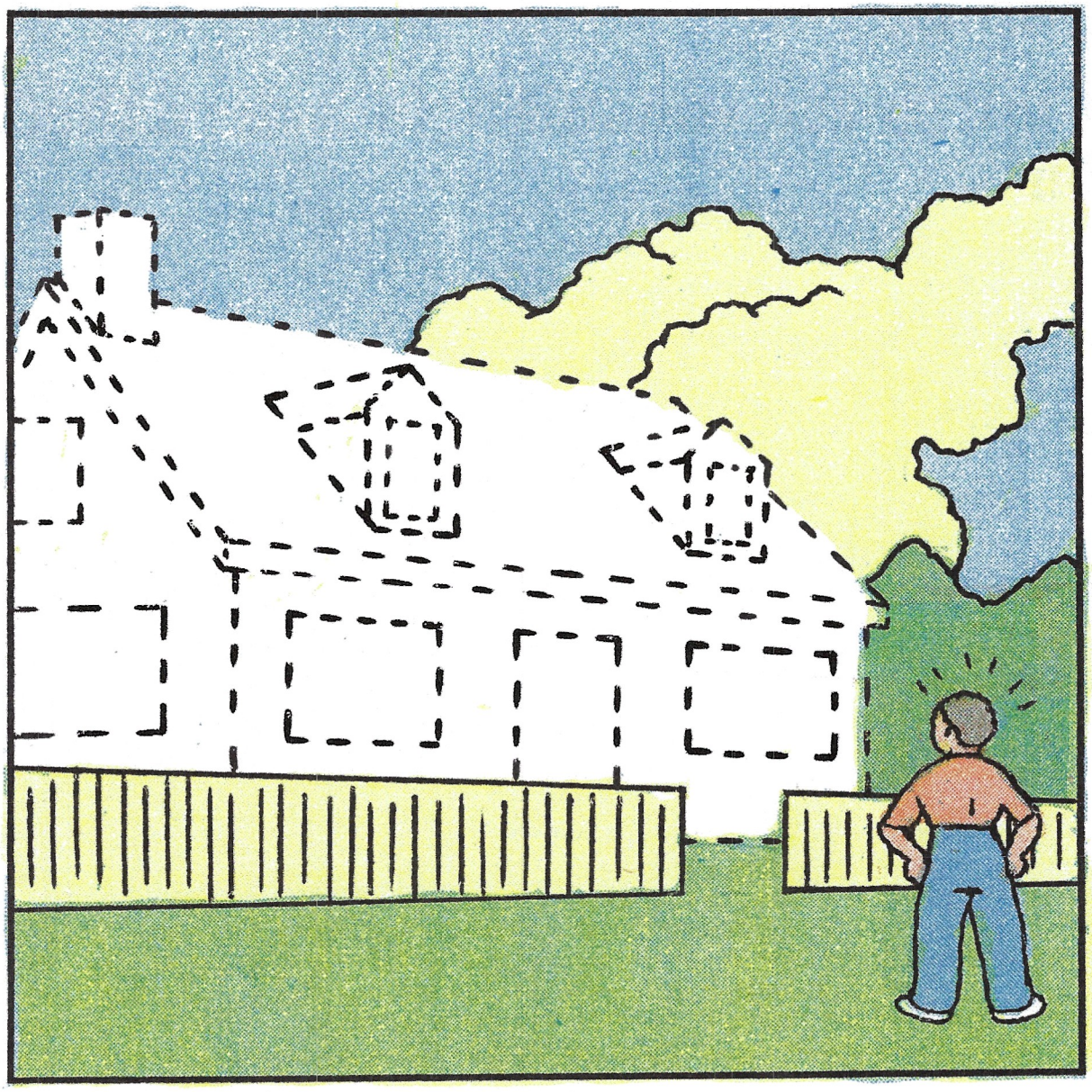
2026-11-15

6TK

STEALING YOUR HOME

Dear borrower, you might be a deed theft victim

Translate



Was a deed theft scheme in process? A letter arrived in the mail from PNC Bank about an address change on a mortgage account. Alain Pilon — The New York Times

By Ron Lieber
The New York Times

Welcome back from vacation! Someone may have stolen your home.

That isn't precisely what the paper letter from PNC Bank, my mortgage servicer, said, but it was close.

It had displayed, in large font, a highlighted exclamation point followed by a foreboding message — "We're confirming changes to your address" — across the top. The letter went on. "We recently received changes to your address information for your account(s), due to an address change request submitted by you or a joint account holder, either to PNC directly or through the U.S. Postal Service."

My wife and I had made no such request. But in a world where deed theft — the attempt to literally swipe your property out from under you — is rampant, the letter signaled that thieves might be up to no good.

But were they? It was way harder than it should have been to answer that question.

After checking PNC's website and seeing no evidence of an address change, I called the 800 number on the letter, as it instructed me to do. In these sorts of instances, it's best to first make sure that the letter itself is not fake and check that phone number against the company website.

The representative on the phone couldn't explain the letter, saw no evidence of it in her systems and told me I could disregard it. That wasn't reassuring, so she told me that I could add a layer of security to my account, but only if I went to a PNC branch.

At 200 Broadway in New York City, I encountered Jonathan Villagomez, a patient branch banker. He didn't know about this supposed heightened security feature, and he made one call and then another to track it down.

During the second call, he passed the phone to me. I spent about 15 minutes with a rep trying to sort it out, and the rep eventually said there actually wasn't any additional layer of security. The whole branch adventure had been a waste of everyone's time.

The original rep I spoke to on the phone, before going to the branch, was both right and wrong, according to a PNC spokesperson I eventually contacted. The bank had sent the letter in error, so it was fine to disregard. Somewhere along the way, something about the absence of our apartment number in one of its records tripped up its systems and led to a belief that someone had changed our address.

But that original rep was wrong that there was any additional available security. We already had two-factor authentication set up (which can keep thieves out of your account if they can't intercept the code that the bank sends in the moment), and that was going to be the best we could do.

The bank spokesperson said it was working to ensure that its reps "have clear guidance for addressing questions related to incidents such as this."

Mistakes are inevitable at big banks with millions of customers. So are the resulting scarygrams like the one we got in the mail, though it's good that the bank confirms that the address changes it detects are real and intentional. But there was in fact more we could do to protect our deed, and we went ahead and did it.

Many local governmental bodies, including ours, allow you to set up an alert for any changes to your deed. So we did that by going to a New York City website.

A quick search for the name of your town or county and something like "property protection alerts" should lead you there, though be on the lookout for fake government websites. If there are no alerts in your area, ask your elected officials to add them.

Then there's EquityProtect, which for $149.99 per year will let you in on a process it has developed that can stop deed theft. The company attaches a kind of lock to your title that creates a roadblock for thieves who are trying to sell your property or borrow against it while pretending they are the legitimate owners.

Jon Dovidio, EquityProtect's vice president of business development, said I was right to send up flares with PNC. He pointed me to a harrowing case in New York City in which the owner of an inherited property got an email from the mortgage servicer about an address change. He contacted the company and discovered that someone had paid off the loan. When he went to the property, he encountered construction workers throwing his childhood photo albums into a dumpster.

I didn't sign up for EquityProtect and probably won't for now, so this is not necessarily an endorsement. Deed theft often occurs when criminals take advantage of older owners or target vacant properties where the owner may have recently died and heirs are delayed or distracted. That's not our situation, but if it was, I'd think hard about whether EquityProtect's offering was worth it.

You or someone close to you might fit this description, though. If you do, don't let your paper mail or email pile up. After all, your next letter could be the real thing.