

Password Pains

A gently bittersweet chronicle of modern logins

English reading copy prepared for Elly

Madam is 86 years old. She is quietly sitting in front of her Mac, with one very simple goal in mind: to find her passwords, because someone explained to her, with great confidence, that everything was neatly stored in the Passwords app.

So she clicks. She even clicks with confidence, which in today's digital world already deserves respect. And then the screen answers her with perfect calm:

"Please enter your password."

"But that's exactly why I came here - to see them!"

At that precise moment, this is no longer just a computer issue. It becomes a very human little drama. Because yes, asking for a password in order to see your passwords does have something of a safe asking for the very key it is supposed to protect.

Welcome to the multiverse of identification

In an ideal world, all this would be simple: you click, it opens, you find what you were looking for, and the matter is settled. You close the computer with that healthy little feeling of having understood something.

But in real life - the one lived by clients, families, accounts opened on a Sunday evening, and devices "set up once and for all" six years ago - things are less elegant.

There is a password. Sometimes a code received somewhere else. Sometimes a validation on another device. Sometimes a face shown to the machine. And sometimes, above all, the strange feeling that all this is happening without you.

The real problem, deep down, is not simply clicking. It is understanding who is checking what, with which account, in what order, and why something that worked yesterday suddenly decides to become theatrical.

The password, that old companion turned touchy

The password is still here. We have been promised its end for years, but in real life it still runs the shop. It is there when the Mac starts up, at the entrance to a website, a bank, an email inbox, or some forgotten service that always wakes up on the very day when you are already tired.

The trouble is that we now ask the impossible of it: it must be long, complicated, different everywhere, impossible for hackers to guess, yet perfectly memorable to you at 7:42 in the morning, without coffee and with your patience already running low.

So naturally, we do what sensible people have always done in the face of chaos: we take a notebook - and we write things down.

The paper notebook: reassuring at first, hieroglyphic in the end

At the beginning, this notebook is a marvel. Everything is neat, clean, carefully written. The lines are readable, the accounts seem clearly identified, the words are written with the seriousness usually reserved for important things.

Then time passes. Passwords change. Accounts evolve. Apple renames things, Microsoft hides others, Google moves messages instead of deleting them, and one day someone "helped a little" before vanishing like an extra in a television series.

The notebook slowly changes. It no longer looks like a list. It becomes a living, nervous, contradictory object.

There are crossed-out lines because "that's not the right one anymore". There are arrows pointing to another page. There is an iCloud crossed out and replaced by Apple. There is an Apple ID corrected into Apple account. And next to the Apple account - not the account itself, but the password. Or the old one. Or the new one. Or the one that "should work".

At this stage, it starts to look like hieroglyphs from a moving-company notebook, with crossings-out, arrows everywhere, and a logic that is perfectly clear to its author - until the day it really has to be used.

The cruelest part is that, despite all the affection one may have for it, this notebook is almost never up to date. It can help, reassure, even save a situation, but it simply cannot keep up with the pace of modern digital life.

The mutant password: or how a simple ! changes destiny

Then comes another scene that can be found in almost every household. You type your password. And the system replies, with that icy politeness that never helps:

"This password has already been used."

Very well then. Since Apple, or the website, or the celestial machinery of the web has decided that your password has lived too much, you must improvise. And this is how the mutant password is born.

You add an exclamation mark. Or two, because one does not quite express the irritation. You slip a number in at the end. You try a dollar sign, because you must show that you are not giving in.

So, over time, one gets respectable creatures such as Password, Password!, Password!!, Password2025, Password\$, and Password!\$.

At that point, it is no longer a password. It is a form of biological evolution.

And a few weeks later, in front of the screen, with no witness and a growing sense of irritation, comes the fatal question:

"Was it with one exclamation mark - or two? And where exactly did I put the dollar sign?"

So yes, from time to time, one is tempted to dream that passwords should be scented. Not necessarily like money - money has no smell, which is probably for the best - but at least like something memorable. "Lavender on a Sunday morning", "hot coffee at eight o'clock", "polished wood on a rainy day"... all that might speak to the human brain more kindly than a little herd of rebellious symbols.

For now, sadly, the digital world has no smell at all. It demands, validates, refuses, almost sighs - but it does not smell of anything.

The keychain... and the carnival of accounts

The Mac itself is not ill-intentioned. In fact, it is trying to help. It offers you an elegant vault, a keychain, a digital memory meant to remember things for you. The idea is lovely: keep your logins, passwords and access points safe, so you no longer have to carry them around yourself like shopping bags on a rainy evening.

Only then, with time, the keychain begins to look like a carnival too.

Three Swisscom accounts. Two Bluewin accounts. Four Microsoft accounts. And, to crown it all, a mysterious live.com that appears from behind the curtains.

"live.com... what on earth is that?"

And then comes the gentle revelation: yes, it is Microsoft - but not the neat, tidy Microsoft you can identify at first glance. No. This is the discreet Microsoft, the underground one, an old Hotmail perhaps, an old Outlook account, a digital relic from a time when people opened email addresses the way they stored instruction manuals in a drawer "just in case".

Microsoft is not dead on the Mac. It has simply made itself invisible.

And that, really, is one of the charms of modern digital life: one thinks one has left a service, a universe, a supplier behind, and then discovers that it has quietly survived in an alias, a login, an automatic suggestion popping up at exactly the wrong moment.

Google and its All Mail box that slowly destroys one's nerves

And then there is Google, adored by some, disliked by many others, with its very special way of pretending to follow common sense while, behind the scenes, practicing a logic entirely its own.

Madam deletes a message on her iPhone. The gesture is simple, neat, decisive. She deleted it. Well... she thinks she did.

Because with Google, in certain cases, deleting is not really deleting. It may mean archiving, moving, taking something out of the inbox while quietly leaving it sitting in a vast lounge called All Mail, whose very name is enough to raise blood pressure in some households.

You thought you deleted it. In fact, you archived it. You thought you emptied something. In fact, you moved it. And then you start looking for it.

The message is therefore both gone - and still there, which gives email a faint fragrance of quantum physics.

"But I have just deleted it!"

Yes. But not in the way a normal human being understands the word delete.

Apple, accounts, identities... and that little fog that grows heavier with time

On Apple's side, the scenery appears calmer, more elegant, almost more civilized. And yet, here too, over the years, a small fog of identity can begin to form. There is the Apple ID, or rather now the Apple account. There is the iCloud address. Sometimes there is an old address. Sometimes there is the spouse's address, or the son's, or the one created one day "just to make things faster", which, in the history of computing, is very often the beginning of a complicated chapter.

And when a message appears saying "This Apple account is not valid", one first imagines disaster. In reality, it is often more ordinary - and more twisted - than that: the account is not false, not dead, not imaginary. It is simply not the right one in this particular context.

In other words, it is not you who is lost. It is the scenery that has developed the habit of changing names without warning.

Passkeys: peace at last? Yes... but not always as one imagines

Then passkeys arrive, with their almost magical promise. And one must be fair: at home, on one's own equipment, in one's own little universe, they can be a real relief. You look, you validate, and you are in. Fewer words to remember, less notebook-searching, fewer furious punctuation marks added at the last minute.

And frankly, in that setting, it is genuine progress. One feels that something becomes lighter, that digital life grows a little less nervous, a little less fussy, a little less obsessed with those ancient passwords that one ends up confusing with their modified cousins carrying exclamation marks and dollar signs.

The trouble is that real life does not unfold entirely at home, sitting comfortably in front of one's Mac, with one's iPhone nearby and one's habits firmly installed. One day you are at a friend's house. Another day you are using another computer. Another day still, you are facing a PC that looks at you with a vaguely hostile expression. And then the smooth modern promise begins to crease.

Because once you are away from home, the old password often comes back to say hello.

Now yes, the system is not completely helpless. There are now more elegant bridges than before: sometimes you can use a passkey stored on your iPhone to log into another device by choosing an option such as nearby device and then scanning a QR code. On paper, this is clever. In real life, for many people, it still feels a little abstract, a little new, a little too subtle to feel like obvious reassurance.

In other words, passkeys do genuinely simplify things - but they do not yet completely erase the old world of passwords, the one that tends to return as soon as one steps outside one's own cocoon.

And for people who prefer things that are more concrete, more tangible, more reassuring, there are also other solutions, such as physical security keys. We will not go into detail here, but their very existence reminds us of something important: between the completely virtual world and the scribbled notebook, there are also intermediate paths.

Deep down, the problem is not people being foolish. It is accumulation

This needs to be said clearly, because it matters and is almost therapeutic: if all this feels confusing, it is not because you are stupid, outdated or "not made for this". It is because modern digital life accumulates. It adds, keeps, renames, archives, hides, suggests, recycles and duplicates. And after a few years, all these little worlds end up living in the same corridor.

We create accounts. We forget some of them. We rename others. We change a password here. We write another one down there. We keep several entries for the same site. And one day, everything spills over.

So the real issue is not so much complexity as saturation - accumulation, clutter, layers upon layers without a clear explanation.

A small preview... before we properly sort it all out

This article is not a manual. It is not yet the prescription. It is rather the moment when one calmly looks at the mess and finally recognizes that the problem is neither imaginary, nor shameful, nor reserved for a few people who are supposedly "bad with technology".

Because this modern mess does have a logic, even if it is often badly explained. Between the notebook that has become a living papyrus, the keychain that keeps accumulating, the accounts that change names, the messages one thought were deleted, and the passkeys that simplify life without yet simplifying everything, there really is a thread running through it all. It just needs to be taken up from the right end.

And that is exactly where a guide will make sense: not to pile technique upon technique, but to bring back simple words, some order, and a little peace.

A future volume of the Guides Sans Panique will therefore speak about identification the way one wishes it were explained more often: calmly, clearly and humanly.

And if, before then, you feel that all this deserves to be reviewed on your own equipment, at your own pace, you can also contact AUCOEURDUMAC and talk it through quietly.

The rest will come. Without sirens, without drama, and with a little more light than jargon.