never quite understood that expression ‘You can’t have your cake and eat it’. I know what it’s supposed to be saying. Still, it doesn’t make sense, does it? But never mind that. The thing is, I think I’ve finally cracked it. Not the construction of the saying – that will always be beyond me. But the central point about the supposed impossibility of having something nice without paying the price. It’s not impossible, as I shall now demonstrate.

A friend of mine had to have some tests – lipids, heart and so on. There was nothing wrong with him especially. He was just getting to the point where even he could no longer think of himself as a young man, and his wife, who had abandoned that particular conceit some years previously, reckoned he ought to have himself checked with a view to cutting down on this and that (cake was only the half of it).

He duly went to his GP’s surgery, where the nurse extracted several quarts of blood from his arm. And having bravely suffered this terrible ordeal, he returned to the reception desk where he was given a slip of paper to hand in at the hospital in exchange for an ECG.

He put the slip unread into his pocket, and a couple of days later, handed it to the cardiologist.

‘I see you know the ropes, then,’ she told him cheerily.

‘Er, no,’ my friend replied. ‘I’m not sure that I do.’

‘But you’ve had an ECG before,’ said the cardiologist, waving the slip his GP had given him.

‘I don’t think I have,’ said my friend, eyeing the piece of paper. ‘May I have a look?’

Sure enough, the docket stated that this was not his first ECG. But look! This was not his date of birth, nor his first name. ‘They got the wrong person,’ he told me that evening. The receptionist had confused him with another patient with the same surname.

It didn’t matter all that much, of course. My friend would simply set the record straight when he returned to pick up the results in a week or so.

‘But hang on a minute,’ I told him. ‘You should do no such thing. Don’t you see? If they think you’re someone else, then they’ll put your test results down on his records.’ It seemed obvious to me. For the rest of his life, he could eat, drink and be merry with impunity. Every lousy test result would be chalked up to this other guy, and my friend could continue doing as he pleased. ‘From now on,’ I told him, ‘you can have your cake and eat it.’

But for some reason, he didn’t seem at all convinced.

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