

Case 7

Lauren Melton, a professional librarian with a master's degree, is one of two reference librarians at the Wentern Public Library. She lives and works in the community of Wentern, a small suburb of a Midwestern city.

Last Monday, Lauren was on duty when a young man came into the library, looked around, and then asked Lauren where the 'card catalog' was. He seemed puzzled by the prospect of looking something up in it, so Lauren took a few minutes to help him learn its features. He told her he was looking up information about the water supply, so she got him started in that direction and went back to her desk. After a short time, he asked to use the library's computers to search databases Lauren had mentioned were on the Internet. The library requires patrons to submit a library card or government issued ID as security while they use the computers. He questioned this requirement but finally gave Lauren his driver's license. Lauren vaguely noticed that his name was David as she put the license in the drawer.

After about 15 minutes, he approached Lauren while she was reshelving an item away from the reference desk. He seemed embarrassed and nervous about seeking help but said he had not found very much useful information. Lauren prided herself on being able to interview patrons and help clarify the type of information they need without making them uncomfortable. But, David was not very forthcoming. After she turned up more information on the "water supply, he finally told her he was specifically interested in chemicals in the water. After more dead ends he specified that he was interested in chemicals that might be dangerous to humans. She gave him more leads and he returned to the computer. When Lauren asked him if this was for a school assignment, he readily agreed. When Lauren said it might help her if she could see the actual assignment, David became rather flustered and said he had forgotten to bring it along. When questioned about the assignment, he gave vague answers. Lauren sensed that David had a very clear idea what he was looking for but that he was unwilling to say it specifically. She gave him some leads and let him work on his own, hoping he would find what he wanted. Several times he came back for more help. Finally, he said maybe she could help him find something on cyanide. Armed with something more specific to seek, she showed him how to find it.

She went back to her desk with a vague sense of unease. The more Lauren worked with David, the more uncomfortable she became. She was a little bothered by his reluctance to say much about the topic and his oddly agitated and nervous behavior. She had many times encountered patrons who were reticent to give too much detail about their information needs. But this unwillingness was usually associated with more social topics like euthanasia or health problems. Further, David's seeming lack of library and computer skills was very atypical for people his age in Melton. She was quite dubious about his working on a school assignment.

Lauren believed strongly in the librarians' code of ethics that protects access to information. Furthermore, the Wentern Public Library District Board had taken specific action to uphold this protection in response to the USA Patriot Act, which requires that a library turn over existing records to law enforcement officials, if asked. Like many libraries, Wentern had instituted policy to keep no permanent record of who uses which computer and had installed new software that absolutely erases any trace of a patron's online activity at logoff.

Lauren had never before been faced with the suspicion that she might be helping a patron do something wrong. Still, as Lauren watched David hunch close to the computer when people walked behind him, her unease grew. She considered the possibility of just writing his name down and hanging on to it privately – just in case. She thought about consulting with her library director. She even thought about calling the police. At that point, she realized she was well down the path to violating a patron's privacy. She chastised herself for not sticking to her belief in his unconditional right of access to information.

During the ensuing hour, Lauren was aware of David making copies of pages from some library books and printing some materials off the Web. He then thanked her politely, retrieved his driver's license, and left.

Lauren wondered for days if she had done the right thing in helping David and in not keeping his name. Several months later, a newspaper article appeared citing a threatened but averted chemical attack on the Wentern municipal water supply. No names were mentioned, but Lauren continued to worry about whether she should have done something and whether she should do something now.

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