

nothing personal

by

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Cast of Characters

Charles Locke            45, artist/adjunct art instructor  
Nancy Heller            55, academic, Charles' Department Chair

Place

The State University of New York, Oswego

Time

Late summer. Late afternoon.

ACT

**Setting:** The university art department office. Nancy's desk is arranged with a framed photo, a laptop, a John Singer Sargent pencil holder, and a five-ball Newton's Cradle desk decoration. These objects form a perfect V pointing toward Nancy's desk chair. Two lower chairs form a seating area with a low table opposite the desk.

**At Rise:** The office is empty. Nancy and Charles can be heard talking as they enter.

CHARLES (O.S.)

(big laugh)

That's amazing!

NANCY (O.S.)

Mayberry meets Chernobyl that's how he described it.

CHARLES (O.S.)

And you came up here anyway. Terry was a charmer.

Charles stands aside and lets Nancy enter first. He has his iphone in his hand. He pockets it just after he sits down.

NANCY

We miss him.

CHARLES

He was a good man.

NANCY

So what brings you up from the city?

CHARLES

(joking)

The folks at distance learning are shopping for office art.

NANCY

(clueless)

Very lucrative aspect of the business?

CHARLES

Kidding actually I...

(diffusing)

We have friends who just bought a house on the lake.

NANCY

You and your...

CHARLES

Ron, my partner.

NANCY

Right. You met when he was a student here?

CHARLES

(polite)

He was a student here. We met after that in New York.

A pause. Charles points to the picture on Nancy's desk.

CHARLES

Is this your daughter?

NANCY

It is.

CHARLES

She looks like you.

NANCY

Maybe when I was pregnant.

CHARLES

(looking more closely)

Congratulations.

NANCY

For? Oh, yes. She's actually due in October. So you're up to...

CHARLES

I'm completely revamping my courses in preparation for the migration to Blackboard this Spring.

NANCY

Right.

CHARLES

New text, a bunch of new video lectures.

NANCY

Video lectures online ...

CHARLES

Distance Learning is dedicating a server so we can stream everything.

NANCY

That's great. What can we do for you?

Charles shifts in his seat trying to approach this subject delicately.

CHARLES

(prepared response)

I thought it would be great to sit down and talk about your goals as chair. How the work I'm doing with my online courses can serve those.

Pause.

CHARLES

Oh, and one thing I wanted to look into as well were the contracts for this fall.

NANCY

All of your classes met their enrollment and are going.

CHARLES

Yea, students actually started interacting with the courses last week but I still haven't got the contracts in the mail. I ran into kind of a tough situation with this last semester.

NANCY

The contracts we're returned late?

CHARLES

I didn't get mine until a month after the semester started.

(pause)

Long story short HR thought my position was terminated since the contracts hadn't come through. They canceled my benefits.

NANCY

So you came up from New York to walk them through?

CHARLES

No one even notifying me until two weeks after they'd done it. I found out when I went to the pharmacy. My card had been canceled.

NANCY

I'm not really sure where they are in the process.

CHARLES

HR said they originate here so I thought..

Pause

CHARLES (CONT'D)

You have to sign them right?

NANCY

I can have Sarah take some time out and track them.

CHARLES

I don't want to make work for anybody, but it was really hard on us.

NANCY

I'm sure

CHARLES

I found out on a Friday. My little boy has asthma. We didn't have enough albuterol to make it through the weekend if he had an attack we would have...

(choking up a bit)

I'm not sure if they would have even admitted us at the ER without insurance. I suppose they would have to. I've never been in that situation. The point is, I've done everything I can do. In twelve years of working for SUNY Oswego I don't think I've ever missed a deadline on anything, ever had a poor evaluation, and there I was powerless to help my little boy, it just..

NANCY

(cutting him off)

Excuse me Charles, I don't want to cut you off but I think I said they're in process...

CHARLES

(jumping in)

Yea, I'm just a little confused since they start with...

NANCY

Excuse me. Excuse me. I can't help you if you won't let me finish my sentences.

Charles is stunned.

NANCY (CONT'D)

I don't respond well to aggressiveness. They may have gone out already. Sarah's gone for the day. Any other questions on this?

CHARLES

No. It's getting late maybe I should get out of your hair.

He starts to leave. He notices something else about the picture. It stops him.

CHARLES (CONT'D)

Is that?

NANCY

Yes?

CHARLES

Your son in law. He looks like the new curator at the Tyler Gallery.

NANCY

Brian took over curatorship last spring.

CHARLES

He took Terry's position?

NANCY

After Terry passed, the Dean decided to split his tenure track position up into two part time positions. One is the curatorship.

CHARLES

(getting it)

You must be very happy having your daughter nearby.

NANCY

(dismissive)

They're glad to be out of the city.

CHARLES

(guessing)

They were at Stienhardt together.

NANCY

Columbia actually.

Pause

NANCY (CONT'D)

While you're here we should look over the Spring schedule.

Charles abruptly sits. Nancy moves back behind her desk. Charles takes out his iphone, does something, and sets it casually on his leg. From this point forward Charles NEVER lets his speech overlap Nancy's. He leaves a short pause after everything she says. It is noticeably unsettling.

CHARLES

I've already been working on my three sections of 110. The migrations is complicated.

NANCY

That may be so but we're having to make some reductions.

CHARLES  
Reductions in online classes?

NANCY  
Loads are being shifted around.

Nancy unconsciously reaches for the picture on her desk and turns it toward herself.

NANCY (CONT'D)  
The result of which is that we are not going to be offer you quite as many sections for the spring.

CHARLES  
How many?

NANCY  
One.

CHARLES  
I'll lose my benefits.

NANCY  
Sounds like you may have been relying too heavily on a part-time job.

CHARLES  
You mean last Fall? I earned the benefits. Wasn't I supposed to count on getting them?

NANCY  
We can't go back in time.

CHARLES  
Are other people's loads being reduced?

NANCY  
I don't think it's appropriate to...

Nancy doesn't finish her own thought.

CHARLES  
May I ask what the criteria are for these decisions?

No response.

CHARLES  
I have twelve years of outstanding student evaluations. I've represented this university at international conferences. Isn't this an issue of seniority...

NANCY

There's no seniority. You're an adjunct.  
You're not being terminated. There is no  
process. It's the chair's discretion.

CHARLES

It's up to you.

NANCY

It's nothing personal.

Long pause.

CHARLES

Your daughter and the young curator.

NANCY

Brian.

CHARLES

They met in art school.

Nancy doesn't respond.

CHARLES

She followed in her mother's footsteps.

NANCY

(proudly)

Yes. Art history.

CHARLES

And she's moved to Oswego with her young  
husband where she's teaching part-time.

NANCY

We seem to have gotten off the topic.

Charles adjusts something on his iphone while speaking.

CHARLES

Always connected whether you like it or not.

NANCY

Maybe we should wrap this up.

CHARLES

When I started teaching online we were using  
dial-up. No streaming video. No identity  
theft. No malware.

NANCY

It's all another world to me.

CHARLES

But you're exposing your daughter to it.

NANCY

Excuse me?

CHARLES

She will be teaching my online classes right? From home, while she takes care of her new baby with the health insurance her curator husband could not otherwise provide for her.

NANCY

This meeting is...

CHARLES

I don't mean to cut you off, but do you have any idea what you're exposed to interacting online, emailing back and forth with over a hundred students a semester. One day I woke up and the background on my laptop was changed to porn. Found out from one of my students how easy it is to take over my whole machine remotely, hacking 101.

NANCY

What are we talking about?

CHARLES

I read about a man who was arrested at Syracuse with child pornography on his hard drive. Did you read about that?

NANCY

(quietly)  
I didn't.

CHARLES

He lost everything, took him years to clear his name. Claimed he didn't download it but of course that's what anyone would say.

NANCY

I suppose that would be more of a danger to a person in your situation.

CHARLES

My situation?

NANCY

A man. No one would believe it of Karen.

CHARLES

I'm thinking about her husband? Brian. His laptop's sitting on the desk in the gallery.

Charles holds up a picture on his phone,

CHARLES (CONT'D)

I loved that Vu-Daniels collage. That is his laptop right? One angry student, one forwarded message bouncing around the university. It might have already happened. Some work study student sees something pop up... there's no due process. He's an adjunct.

NANCY

They're young people just trying to get started. You're threatening...

CHARLES

Whoa-ho-ho threatening? I'm relating a cautionary tale.

Charles holds up his iphone again.

CHARLES

In fact, I should have mentioned, I took the liberty of recording our meeting. Force-of-habit for a person in my "situation." Anyway, something to consider while "loads are being shifted around."

Pause

CHARLES

Any thoughts?

Pause

NANCY

You could help Brian take steps to safeguard against this happening?

CHARLES

With a degree of certainty.

Charles stands to leave. Turns to her.

CHARLES (CONT'D)

Glad we finally got a chance to meet in person; Nancy.

He exits.