

Safety critical

Caught on camera.

John Gilbey

It seemed an excellent idea at the time, and I thought it would look suitably impressive on the CV. No extra money, of course, but you knew that, didn't you? I did wonder though why we needed the post, when the lab-information system manages most things anyway. I mentioned this to Alan, the Head of Process. He sighed deeply, and turned to me with the look he usually reserves for undergraduates and other pond life.

"John," he said patiently, "now that most chemistry is locked up in fabrication complexes, people equate all chemicals with danger. By still having a human — well, almost human — Compliance Manager, we are sending the right messages. We make it look safe. The VC thinks this is important, and — trust me on this — we want the VC to be happy. It's almost an honorary post really — so why worry?"

After this reassurance it came as a cruel blow when a turgid document landed in my Work-Space the following week labelled "University of Rural England — Chemical Non-Compliance Schedule November 2027". It seemed that we had transgressed mightily in the complex matter of chemical disposal. We had been pressed to rid ourselves of a number of supposedly hazardous materials — but when the men in moon-suits had removed the stock they reckoned there was a portion missing.

Now, you'll understand that this is almost a capital crime, and I realized with bowel-lurching horror that I desperately needed to track down the residue — especially as the escalation path led straight to the Senate if I didn't.

The lengthy appendices of the report told me what was adrift — some fairly heavy metals and assorted inorganics. Then it was a case of kicking the procurement database until it talked the lab data repository into giving us the best profile match in the work that people admitted doing.

Bingo! Armed with a name, a project number and some suspiciously vague lab notes I trotted off to find the culprit. Two floors below ground level, in a corridor edged with pipe work and ominously caged equipment, I found his lair. 'S02-57 — Hazard: Restricted Access' read the uninspiring caption on the door. The

grey, gnome-like occupant of the room was almost as welcoming.

I explained my problem: he shrugged. I suggested that his work matched the stuff we were missing: he avoided my gaze. I pointed out that Alan wouldn't be pleased: he squirmed. When I mentioned the Senate and the VC, he put his hands up and started to negotiate.

"So if I tell you, we can sort it out quietly?" he suggested. I made what I hoped were non-committal noises. "OK — I used the stuff, silver salts mostly, to do some imaging..." It took a moment for this to sink in.



"You mean," I floundered, "to take old fashioned photographs?" He nodded slowly. "But surely you know that it's been illegal to take images with a non-networked device for at least the past ten years? He looked glum. I checked later — it was in the Public Security (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act, 2015. The idea, apparently, was to ensure that the security services could analyse everyone's pictures for signs of sedition — God knows what they make of mine. Luckily, everyone wants their pictures networked anyway — especially now that cameras do such a good job of processing us to be taller, thinner and more tanned.

"They aren't really images," he said cagily, "more works of art. My girlfriend... she wouldn't let me image her if there was any chance THEY would see them." On the word 'they' he waved his arms upwards in a weirdly paranoid gesture. I began to wonder about my personal safety.

Smiling only on the inside, I struggled to construct a form of words. "I'll need to see the evidence myself — for the report." He stood up, and for a moment I thought he was going to hit me. Instead, he turned and opened what I had taken to be a cupboard door. The acrid stench of poorly managed chemistry hit me like a well aimed clipboard. My lips began to tingle and my eyes watered involuntarily — I began to envy the men in the moon-suits. In the gloom I could see an ancient plate camera and other paraphernalia of the long-dead photographic art. There was enough trouble here to end any number of promising careers, but mine was the one at the top of the list.

From a corner of the hidden room he reluctantly produced a large folder. Not without trepidation, I opened it. The Victorians would probably have called the picture a 'classical study' — I called it a rather lumpy lady with no clothes on. The scene was modestly arranged, and I turned the print to see her other side. Nothing happened.

"It's a 2-D print, not a hologram," he pointed out. I felt slightly cheated. "It's an interesting tone," I offered conversationally. "What makes it that colour?"

He looked at me coldly. "Mercury and cyanide," he said. I put the print down carefully and wiped my hands on my trousers.

Mind you, considering the limitations of the subject matter, and the fact that he had manufactured the film and paper himself, it wasn't a bad job. When you looked closely, and overlooked her Rubenesque stature, her expression was haughty, powerful and vaguely familiar.

Back upstairs, I took deep breaths of clean, conditioned air and gazed impatiently across the campus at the retro-styled heap of glass and steel that houses the university administration — desperate to delay sending my infraction report out to an unsuspecting world.

I had stopped trying to optimize the wording — I had already accepted that there was no phraseology in the cosmos that could help me now. Even without her clothes, the steely gaze of the vice-chancellor was unmistakable. ■

John Gilbey is a writer and photographer with an unhealthy interest in silver-based imaging. He is at pains to point out that he writes in a private capacity.

JACEY