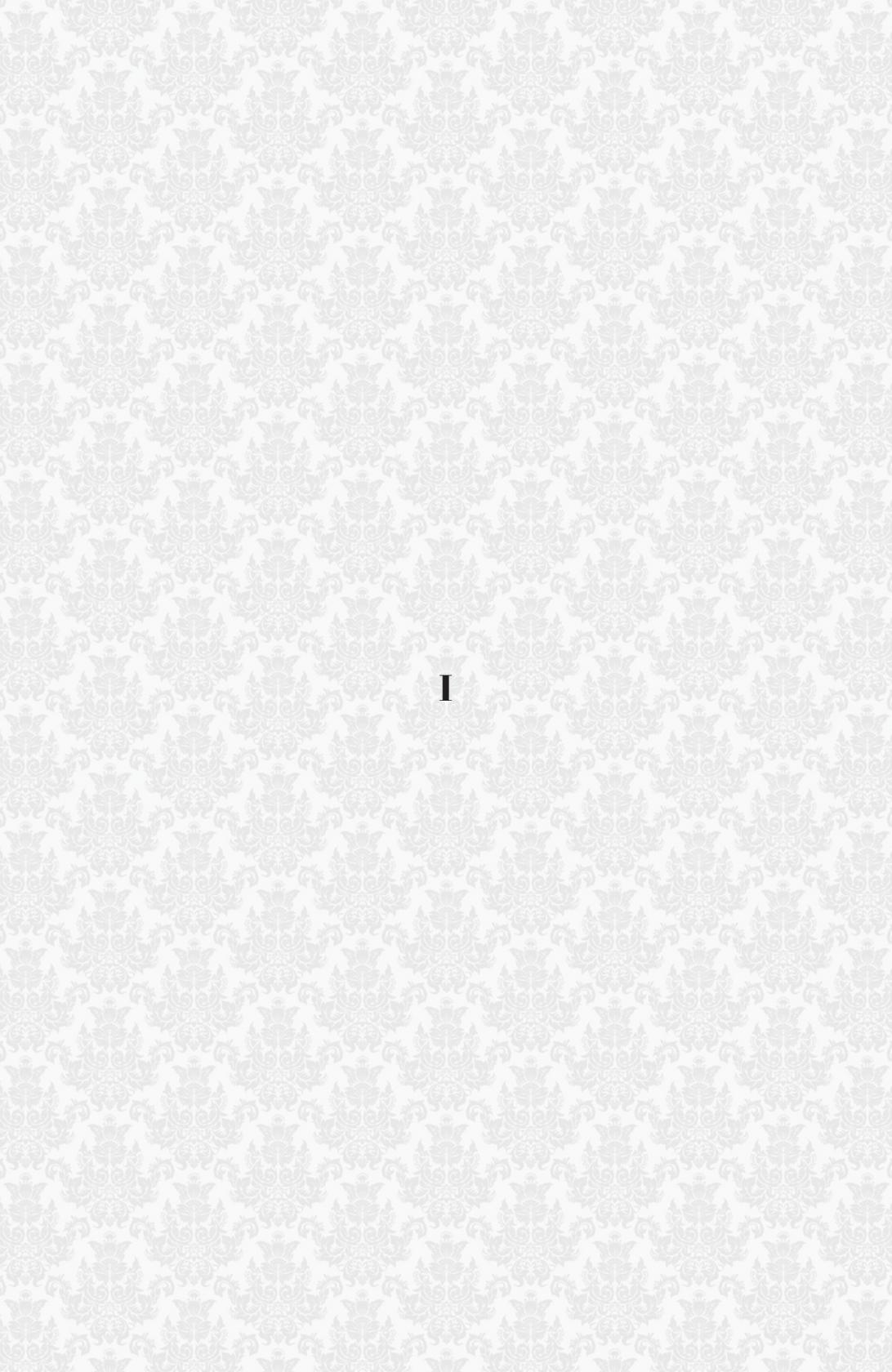


THE APOLOGY

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Astrophil Press
at University of South Dakota
2021



I

I'LL EXPLAIN THE CHEMICAL WEAPONS LATER, but if you want to get to the bottom of this stalking business you should talk to Kit Carson, the computer guy. That's his real name—Kit Carson. I called him KC because Kit Carson is too stupid a name to repeat, and he almost never complained about it.

KC was the one who organized the Friday night happy hour and tried to make it sound to the new girl in payable like we always got together Friday nights after work, especially weeks when someone new started, to get to know her, he meant, them, even though he'd never shown any company pride before and had probably been directly responsible for the failure of my previous attempts at community building, like the office scavenger hunt and the adopt-a-highway program. Two years later they were still finding staplers in weird places and our stretch of I-76 looked pathetic. It was embarrassing.

I was suspicious even before the whole happy hour charade. In fact, I was on to him from day one. It was only about halfway to lunch on Monday morning and KC was already on his way back from his second cigarette break. I saw him coming from down the hall and tried to look busy because he was doing that walk that means he thinks he's the Sultan of Software—I've actually heard him use the phrase out loud—and I didn't want to hear about how he made short work of some installation that was giving everybody else all kinds of trouble, which is boring and I don't understand a word of it anyway. Except this time he didn't want to talk about information technology. This time he wanted to talk about something I understand perfectly well, which is women.

I was finishing up an email, an important response to an important message, and told myself not to look at him.

Just stare at the monitor.

I looked at him.

“Porn again?” he said, and cracked up.

That one never stopped being funny for him. I rolled my eyes and minimized my browser.

“Business,” I said.

He rolled *his* eyes.

“I told you it’s a scam,” he said.

If you listened to KC everything was a scam. It made you wonder how he thought anyone ever caught a break. I mean, it’s not like you just sit at some desk until one day you suddenly turn into Horatio Alger.

“You don’t even know what it says,” I said.

“Lemme guess,” he said. “Your long-lost uncle won the lottery in the UK but he died before he could pick up the money.”

Ask somebody’s advice about a proposition from some Nigerians one time and you’ll never hear the end of it.

“Never mind,” I said.

“Think of it this way,” said KC, “if anybody’s offering to do *anything* with you at all it’s a scam, because no one would trust you with anything business-wise. You’re an idiot.”

In a sense he had a reason to think I was an idiot when it came to business. For a while after I asked him about the email from the Nigerians—this was probably my first month in the office—he would stop and ask me who was trying to hand me their millions every time he saw me looking at my computer.

“Where’s the big money coming from today?” he’d ask. “Shenzhen? Budapest? Pyongyang?”

One Monday morning I got fed up and said, “This guy I know from college.”

“He as dumb as you?” said KC.

“He’s a chemist,” I said. “He has an idea that’s gonna make us both rich.”

Mention a scientist and everything changes.

“What’s the idea?” he said.

There was no idea, just like there was no scientist.

“I’m supposed to just give it away?” I said.

“I don’t know anything about chemicals,” he said.

“But that’s the thing,” I said. “It’s so simple, we can’t believe no one’s ever thought of it before.”

KC pulled up a chair, sat down.

“Maybe I can help,” he said. “Build a website or something.”

“Actually, we might be able to use you,” I said. “My friend does all the technical stuff; I’m doing marketing, the face of the operation. We could use an IT guy.”

“So what is it?” he said.

I looked around to make sure we were alone and leaned forward.

“You ever notice how pretty much every household cleaner uses either ammonia or chlorine bleach?” I said.

He nodded.

“Don’t you think it would be even better if you combined them into the most powerful cleaning product known to man?” I said.

He broke out with a big, slow smile, mouth so wide the fur of his Vandyke almost reached his ears.

“We call it ChlorAmmo,” I said.

He walked away like he had a newfound respect for me and was nice and considerate the rest of the day, but the next morning he stormed up to my desk and yell-whispered: “Poison!”

He was right. When you combine chlorine and ammonia you get chlorine gas. Chlorine gas will slip into your lungs, especially in poorly ventilated spaces, and react with whatever water’s in there to form hydrochloric acid, which everybody knows corrodes human tissue, meaning it can burn or eat you from inside out.

Unless you have more ammonia in the mixture than bleach. That makes hydrazine, which they use in rocket fuel. It mostly gets at you through direct contact with your mucus membranes, but even inhaling its fumes can be dangerous over long periods of time. That hardly matters because it’s highly unstable and will probably explode in your face before you get a chance to sniff at it.

But I couldn’t admit I knew that.

“What are you talking about?” I said.

“ChlorAmmo?” he said. “It’s poison.”

“Everything’s poisonous when you use it wrong,” I said. “You don’t swallow bleach or take a bath in ammonia or vice versa. Everything has its proper use, including ChlorAmmo, under the right circumstances. It could clean up a lot of messes.”

Science again. KC backed off, but he wasn't nice to me this time; he just avoided me the rest of the day.

And then he didn't come in the next day. Or the next day. Or the next. He might have called in sick, but nobody told me, and I started to worry that he'd tried to mix chlorine and ammonia himself, at home, with a bucket and some rubber gloves or something.

I alternated between feeling guilty for giving him the idea and feeling like it served him right for trying to steal it, until he came in the next Monday morning like nothing unusual had happened. I didn't ask him where he'd been and he didn't say, but after that he shied away from the scams, stuck to asking me about porn, unless I was idiot enough to mention business.

"Anyway, that's not why I'm here," he said.

"No," I said, "you're here to work. Or you should be."

"Actually I work over there," he said pointing to a cubicle across the room. "I'm here," he pointed at my desk, "to ask you," he pointed at me, "if you've seen the new girl," he pointed his thumb over his shoulder and down the hall, "in payable."

"You mean woman?" I said. "Or are we suddenly breaking child labor laws and you're some kind of pervert?"

He rolled his eyes again and walked over to his cubicle without looking back.

I was just being obnoxious. I knew what he meant. What I didn't know was why he'd asked me if I'd seen the new girl in payable. Was it just a casual who's the new girl? Was she particularly attractive or particularly ugly? With some fantastic deformity? My curiosity was piqued, but I couldn't give KC the satisfaction of showing it by walking down the hall, checking her out, and reporting back immediately.

IT WAS A LONG WAIT FOR LUNCH. I couldn't keep my mind on the email I was writing. One minute I was wracking my brain for the perfect closing salutation and the next I was imagining some shady and complicated business involving poor but noble Eastern European peasants who dressed sort of medieval, and international slave traders with bleached blond hair and an eye patch here and there; a long trip in a dark, dank shipping container with several catastrophes along the way, over which a certain pure, young, once-peasant, now apparently white slave girl's indomitable spirit prevails because of her beauty and her innocence; and finally the arrival in a certain American city known for brotherly love and also its former excellence in slave trading, where only the most beautiful and pure of them—that same peasant girl who had overcome so much in the crossing—would be sold to payable, where her job would be to satisfy the sordid desires of important businessmen and clients. But she would resist the advances of these sleazy fat cats, finding herself irresistibly attracted to a lowly office manager who felt the need to go to lunch a little early.

I mention this little indiscretion with the early lunch so you know I'm being completely candid.

I STOPPED INTO PAYABLE ON MY WAY OUT, just to see if anybody needed anything.

“I’ve got some errands to run. Urgent stuff,” I said, looking around and peering over cubicles, which isn’t too hard for me because I’m on the tall side. “So I’m heading to lunch a little early. Anybody need anything?”

There were a couple of grunts, a head shake or two, maybe a *no thanks*, but I didn’t press the issue because I didn’t see anyone in there I didn’t recognize and I didn’t actually want to get anybody anything. I figured the new girl must be at lunch already, in which case, if she wanted to keep her new job, she’d be back by the time I got back from mine.

I left.

But you have to take the elevator to get to street level from our office unless you want to walk down seventeen floors in business shoes, which is enough to make your knees creak aloud just thinking about it, and the restrooms are a little to the left of the elevators, and I thought maybe I’d been wrong about the new girl already being at lunch; maybe she was just answering the call of nature, which is perfectly natural, even if you don’t like to think about such a pure and innocent thing doing it.

There was a ding and the elevator door opened arrow pointing downward as I stood there imagining the new girl in payable on the toilet, and before I realized it the door was closing and the elevator was moving on. I decided I’d wait a minute to push the button again. I didn’t want the elevator to get worn out, which is a thing I’m very sensitive to, because, as the only office manager, I myself am always being pulled in a million different directions, and also because one time I got stuck in there for about three hours on the way up one morning, and when they finally got me out I’d had it and decided it called for a mental health day, but my boss, Ms. Miles, docked me eight vacation hours instead, and what could I do about it? Get it down to five, that’s all, since at least the first three weren’t my fault.

The new girl was taking a long time in the bathroom and it was starting to creep me out to tell the truth. I wondered what she could be doing in there. Maybe I inched a little closer to the door, but it's not like I was about to put my ear to it or anything when a voice behind me said: "What are you doing there?"

I jolted into her—I could tell it was a her by the voice and by the feel of her enormous, matronly breasts against my shoulder blades—and almost knocked her over. I probably would have knocked her over if I hadn't spun around and grabbed her huge, flabby arm just in time. Rita. The receptionist.

"Rita!" I said.

She was looking straight at me, but she turned her head so she could look at me out of the corner of her eye. Not a word of thanks. As if I'd meant to knock her over.

"What are you doing?" she said in a tone that said whatever I'd been doing was wrong.

"Waiting for the elevator," I said. "You?"

"Going to the ladies," she said, like ladies' was an exclusive club where I wasn't welcome.

I nodded, stood there to show I was comfortable with my version of what I'd been doing and make sure she was, too. She kept at it with the corner-vision, made an out-of-my-way gesture with one fat hand. I looked over my shoulder, noticed I was sort of half-blocking her way into the women's room, more if you account for her size, and edged toward the elevator bank so she'd see that's what I'd been there for all along. She made a big production of turning sideways and sucking in as if to show I still hadn't given her enough room or had forced her to eat three pieces of cake at the last office birthday party, and kept her eye on me until she was all the way in with the door closed behind her like she was worried I was going to follow her in and molest her or something. If you've ever laid eyes on Rita, you know that would never cross my mind, even if you haven't laid eyes on me. I'm cute enough, believe it or not. Just ask Bonnie Barstow.

I heard the lock click behind Rita and realized the new girl hadn't been in there after all, unless this was some lesbian tryst. But what kind of white slave peasant ingénue would be arranging elaborate

lesbian trysts after only one morning at work? And with Rita? That's just stupid.

I checked my phone and saw my lunch break was already half up. No time to wait for the elevator, and besides, I didn't want to risk being there when Rita got out. I took the stairs and my knees started creaking, grinding really, before I'd made it two flights.