

# Unfinished business

In cold storage.

**John Gilbey**

The symptoms are always the same. You don't see anyone around the unit for a few days, then the locksmith's van appears outside and is met by a couple of smart, relaxed-looking folk carrying clipboards. Shortly after, trucks from the leasing agencies turn up and begin to haul off all the hired lab equipment. Then there is a brief hiatus, until Ed the caretaker wanders over with his mop-bucket-on-wheels to start cleaning up the real detritus.

These lab units were custom designed for start-up companies. The University of Rural England had a grand vision of playing midwife to the next generation of potentially global brands, which would move on up the food chain and — naturally — be immensely grateful to their former hosts when they achieved scientific world domination. Well, it hasn't exactly worked that way. As you can tell, I've been keeping tabs on the comings and goings — and I have to tell you that locksmith visits outweigh champagne receptions by at least six to one.

There is always a good side though — even to business failure. My lab overlooks the parking for the units, and when I see Ed arrive and start to clear things out I know it is time to wander over. I look on it as a kind of beachcombing — picking up unconsidered trifles that would otherwise end up in landfill somewhere. I'm sort of recycling really, so I'm doing everyone a favour.

I never really got to know Joe and Emily, or 'BioAlgorithm Systems' as they called themselves, as well I'd have liked to. Sure, we'd had coffee at the place round the corner — even swapped war stories in the pub after work — but they were the secretive sort. You know, "We've got the next Big Thing and we can't talk about it", and lots of secret smiles that might have been either sex or business. All I could get out of them was that they were developing some sort of holographic storage system — but as he was a biologist and she was a mathematician I couldn't see how. They'd seemed pretty relaxed about funding though, so I was surprised to see that they'd failed — and not a little hurt that Emily hadn't said goodbye.

As I sauntered into Unit Three I could see that Ed was going to have his hands full with this one. They must have left in a hurry — there was rubbish everywhere: paper files spilled over the floor, the desk in the main office had the congealed remains

of several takeaway meals strewn over it and the square white spaces left after the leased kit had been removed were infested with balls of fluff and lost pens. Still it looked like rich pickings for me, a point I wouldn't be confiding to Ed. He nodded as I wandered over to where he stood, sweeping rubbish into a corner. "What do you reckon?" he asked. "Any of it worth a few quid to you?" I shrugged as nonchalantly as I could, having already seen a nice set of microscope objectives peeking from an open drawer. "I dunno Ed, maybe one or two bits might be handy." I made a cash donation to his favourite charity — himself — and started to rummage in earnest.

It didn't take long to round up everything with a decent brand name on the box, and I was just on the point of leaving when Ed called me over. He was wearing his tabloid reader's grin and looked unpleasantly pleased with himself. "Have a look at this, mate. Not bad, eh?" Ed leered. He nodded towards the back of the lab, a curtained-off area apparently used for projection or video conferencing. On the white wall, someone had stuck a large photograph of Joe and Emily — stark naked.

It looked vaguely familiar — and I don't mean anatomically. My internal search engine rumbled along its dusty shelves looking for a match, and then mentally clicked its fingers. Yes — it was a close copy of the Voyager plaque. You know the one, the rather dubious metal plate attached to the first spacecraft to leave the Solar System — to show aliens what we looked like and where we lived. This was not a straight re-enactment though — in this one it was Emily who had her arm raised, and not in greeting. She looked seriously pissed off that the picture was being taken.

I thought about peeling the picture off as a souvenir, but it was too thin and well stuck down — maybe even printed *in situ*. While Ed was out emptying his bin though, I managed to sneak a couple of shots with my phone — just something to

remember her by, you understand, and wonder what might have been.

On the bench near the image, some custom electronic kit was still running — although the controlling PC had been removed. I had a quick look, but it was a hasty lash-up and was all high-power stuff I didn't recognize. Even the expensive-looking optical head was too non-standard to be useful to me. As I turned to leave, my foot caught the corner of a small remote control that skittered off into a pile of clothes left on the floor. I looked back at the photograph, with a question half-formed in my mind, and the room grew suddenly quiet. Ed had knocked off the bench power to save energy until the next tenant turned up. I felt a sudden craving for strong ale.

Despite the beer, I didn't sleep well that night, and got back to the lab as early as my hangover allowed — but not before all the remaining kit had been dumped in the skip outside by the contractors brought in to refurbish the unit. When I walked in to the lab I was just in time to see a fat guy with a paint roller cover the picture with a thick coat of magnolia emulsion.

I've often wondered what it looks like from underneath. ■

**John Gilbey is visionary in residence at the University of Rural England.**

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