

GEODE

Breaking new ground.

BY JOHN GILBEY

They didn't like my coffee. My two unexpected visitors kept sipping politely, but I could tell it was a victory of determination over reflex. Still, it made them get to the point.

"It's about the geode," the older woman began, as if they'd want to talk about anything else. I felt my usual burst of savage emotion. Regret that I'd ever found the thing, that I hadn't realized what it was, and that anyone had ever found out about it. Still, I didn't see what they could possibly find out from me that wasn't already in the documentaries, that dumb feature film (why did I ever get involved with that?), the book and the interviews. I said so, rather too forcefully maybe, but they just shared a knowing smile.

"You remember the digs at Book Cliffs?" the woman asked. "They drew a blank, sure, but now we know why — they were in the wrong place." From a leather bag she carefully withdrew a stained, battered notebook. I swore, and their smiles grew broader.

"Where the hell did you find this?" I spluttered, as I ran my fingers over the binding. "I haven't seen this for maybe 40 years!"

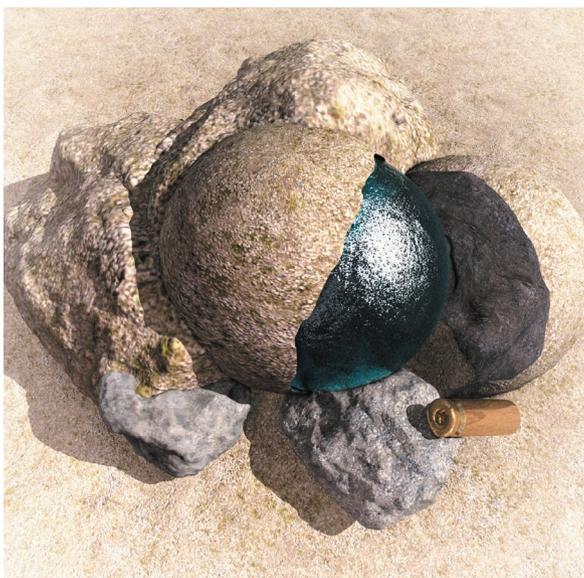
"It was in a box of random stuff in an archive at that UK university. It was dumped there when they cleared your office, which you apparently left in rather a mess..."

I don't even recall having the notebook in England — but hey, I guess that's why I never found it. I flipped through it, looking at a younger man's handwriting. Half-familiar sketches marked my scorched, painful progress along the cliff front, from talus cone to bluff, noting where I'd taken cores for particle-size analysis. On one, a single 'G' in pencil showed where I'd found the geode — it was not where I'd remembered, and many miles from where I'd directed folk to look when they'd come to me a dozen years later. Heck, this was pre-GPS, pre-smartphone, pre-everything.

The feel of the pages and the smell of the paper took me back to that distant summer. I'd been digging a clean profile to sample, I got distracted and the pick hit something hard. A scarred rocky sphere the size of an orange had split to reveal an almost perfectly circular face, the other half shattered into spicules by the impact. It was pretty, with

iridescent colours in its cleanly sheared crystal surface. I'd used it as a paperweight for a decade or more until a new graduate student picked it up and turned it over one day. "It's a geode," I told her. "I'm not so sure," she replied. "Mind if I take a look?"

Well, she scanned it in as many spectra as the campus could muster, then consulted crystallographers, who in turn spoke quietly but urgently to cryptographers and linguists.



The name 'geode' stuck, even though it patently wasn't one — nor, apparently, was it of this planet. Brighter folk than me reckon that uncounted swarms of these crystalline nodules were spawned across the galaxy by an unknown intelligence, to fall randomly into the gravity wells of distant systems. This one made a splash landing in a warm, shallow sea before getting embedded in sedimentary rocks — to be eroded out some 70 million years later. And I broke it with a pickaxe. What remains of the sphere is part of a massive library which, teased out with tools described in the simpler outer layers of the codex, has given us centuries of advancement in a generation — yet it's frustratingly incomplete, giving only tantalizing, semi-exploitable windows on the seemingly impossible.

The younger woman nodded to the notebook, glanced up and grinned archly. "We're going to see if we can rescue more of the geode. Care to join us? Just to warn you, it could be a long trip

— we may not be able to get you back anytime soon..." Well, what would you have said?

Two days later I was shaken awake in the back of a tired old SUV somewhere in Utah. "You OK?" asked Ellen, the younger of my two companions. I blinked a few times, checked I wasn't going to vomit, and nodded. "Andrea reckons this is the right trail-head. Come and see what you think — but hurry, we're running late." Aching and disoriented, I climbed down and breathed deeply. It was early evening and in the hot, dry air the rusty colours of the bluffs stood out against the deep blue of the sky.

Checking the notebook, I turned west until my sketch of the cliffs lined up with the landscape. Then, with a heavy sense of *déjà vu*, I shouldered my pack and headed off towards the cliffs — closely followed by my heavily laden minders. Ellen carried a rifle, and when she checked the magazine put a round in the chamber — heck, these people were serious. She saw my expression, and shrugged. "You never know..." A memory tickled just below the surface, then fled.

An hour later, although it felt like four, I struggled up what I thought was the last ridge. Looking beyond it I realized that someone had beaten us here. A lanky, bearded young man in jeans and a lumberjack shirt was digging in the sediment; he paused to swig from a canteen of water. Andrea stopped beside me. "Quick! We only get one shot at this..." She was talking to Ellen, but the young man was already lifting the pickaxe. "STOP!" she yelled with her whole being. He dropped the pick and whirled around, momentarily blinded by the sun. The sharp sound of brittle fracture came to us just as Ellen raised the gun; I reached out and pushed the barrel aside.

"Did... I do that...?" grated Andrea, her tone anguished. I slowly shook my head. "No, it's down to me, just like last time."

Below me in the evening sunshine, my younger self had just spotted the cleaved surface of the geode — while I slowly began to comprehend the truly fundamental nature of the knowledge it carried. ■

John Gilbey writes from the academic seclusion of the University of Rural England. He hopes to give his younger self a severe talking to before too long.

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