

Bat Cave Jasper

[in progress]

January 2022

by Karl Stull

The 24 Display Cases

Case title	Created by
Pinkie	Ken Tanaka, vice-president (deceased)
Wired Weird	Marianne Avalone, newsletter
Tumbling	Luis Regalo, benefactor
Geodes à-Go-Go	James and Roz McCleggy, gossips
Picture Jasper	Heinrich Blatt, geologist
Ancient Oasis	Roy Avalone, president
Fire in the Hole	Delbert Musselman, annual show chair
It's All Quartz	Millie Zhang, treasurer
Field Tripping	Ed Bailey, field trips chair
Toothless Saws	Suzette Sanger, workshop chair
My Lapi-Diary	Hector Pradera, junior in high school
Rocco's Pizza	Coral Finchum, membership chair
Owl Hole	Doris Drusenberg, lifetime member
Quartzsite	James and Roz McCleggy, gossips
Gluey Turquoise	Lucius Tiber, secretary
San Gabriels Gold	Soapy Stovall, miner
Gabbro Brooch	Margot Arrete, jewelry teacher
Viewing Stones	Sandra Shore, psychic consultant
Mosaic Tortoise	Shane Grandville, artist
Bonsai Gem Trees	Will Meyer, small business (gift shop)
Spheres	Heinrich Blatt, geologist
Spirals	Akira Saito, fisherman
Bat Cave Jasper	Mike Banks, sculptor
Bolo Ties	Chuckawalla Slim

Chapter 1

Pinkie

They say the eyes are windows to the soul. I say you get a good view too in display cases at a rockhound show. A typical show has dozens of cases, most of them personal collections but some educational and others organized around a theme such as “Look What the Glacier Dragged In.” A case with a theme is like a tiny stage and the rocks are players. They have no entrances or exits, but they say their piece. A few make you laugh. I’ve only ever seen one person cry in front of a display case. Now and then, a case may leave you staggering from beauty shock.

I’m not a rockhound. I went to the Reseda Gem and Mineralogical Society show because my uncle Luis owns the venue, a hangar at the local airport. Sally came to the show with me because she actually likes rocks. On hikes in the Santa Monica Mountains, she used to pick up this rock or that because it was pretty or showed a streak of unexpected color. She would turn me around to put her rock in my backpack. Eventually these rocks ended up in pots with favored plants on our patio. Sally told the plants their new friend would look nice and help them grow. Sometimes the rocks had names, such as Ginger or Lefty.

Sally and I ambled into the hangar for the RGMS show through the people door. The big doors for airplanes were

shut. The hangar's regular tenants had found other places to park for the weekend — an executive jet, two bush planes, and a two-seat trainer, the latter owned by the actor who plays Mordred in the Pendragon movies. We came to a Welcome table, where cheerful ladies wearing polished-stone necklaces and bracelets encouraged us to buy raffle tickets. The prizes were mostly polished-stone necklaces and bracelets made by members of the Reseda Gem and Mineralogical Society. The grand prize was a refurbished gem faceting machine. Not for everybody, but interesting. Second prize was a big-screen television.

Beyond the Welcome table, the high arch of the hangar loomed like a giant soup can cut lengthwise. Four aisles of vendors in table-and-drape booths offered merchandise that rockhounds cannot resist buying over and over again — finished jewelry, supplies for making jewelry, field tools for prying and cracking rocks, shop tools for shaping and polishing rocks, books about where to find rocks, and specimens of rock from mountain ranges around the world. Slabs by the hundred lay in trays that were either filled with water or had a squirt bottle handy, because rocks look their best when wet. Sally browsed the patterns and colors, like swatches in an upholstery sample book. I marveled at how the folding-table legs stood up to the weight. And I marveled to think of these mom-and-pop vendors hauling their quarter-ton of rocks in for set-up and

then hauling it all back to the truck after the show and then rolling down the road to the next show. It seemed there was something about the life that they liked a lot. It wasn't the money. Half were cash-only.

While Sally browsed, I ventured to the far end of the hangar. There were tables arranged in a 20-foot square with place mats, as if for a feast of rock eaters. The banner read Silent Auction. Inside the square, a man and woman in yellow and black RGMS vests buzzed back and forth, serving up the next course of rocks on the place mats. As I learned later, they were James and Roz McCleggy, the humming hive for all RGMS gossip.

I considered a potato-size gob of shiny black obsidian. Good for making arrowheads, if someday I learned how. I put the gob back on its place mat and had a look at a fire agate that Sally might have ooh-and-ah'd over. In the end, I put in a bid for a piece of tuff that looked like it had been scooped off the top of a lemon meringue pie. Tuff is worthless, a mix of mostly air and volcanic ash, but I scrawled a bid of two dollars. A note on the bid card said: "A rock that floats!"

It floats to this day, in a jar on my desk. Peaks of the meringue stick up above the waterline. Most of the rock hangs below the surface, like an iceberg. The air trapped inside has been in there 15 million years. I change the water on Mondays, unless I'm out.

I came to a line of tables set up for Demonstrations. At the first table, a teenage boy with hair like bunch grass —

Hector Pradera, by his name badge — ran a grinder/polishing machine with six wheels whirring. He wore a face mask to keep rock dust out of his young lungs. Every rockhound knows silicosis is bad news.

“Labradorite,” he said, showing me a pecan-size stone. He applied the stone to the second wheel, smoothing the dome shape, and then to the third and fourth wheels, starting to bring a shine to the surface. He pointed to an array of finished cabochons on a stand. “There’s a cab I finished earlier.”

The finished labradorite was mid-ocean blue. Polishing had revealed depths in the blue that you could stare into for hours, and maybe read the future. People read a lot into rocks.

“Nice,” I said.

With a nod, Hector agreed the result was awesome and returned to polishing at the next wheel.

At the second table sat the wise owl of RGMS, the club’s senior member, Doris Drusenberg. Doris was built like a sequoia, and her skin was the color of stained oak, as if from a lifetime of playing poker in smoke-filled rooms. Her wide-open eyes were set in big round sockets, giving her a permanent look of surprise turning into dismay. There were specialty pliers on the table in front of her — round jaws, half-round, squared, stepped, bent — ready for any challenge of fit or flourish. Doris was demonstrating how to create a custom setting for a polished stone using silver wire.

At the third table, Master Sergeant Tyrell Banks (Retired) was carving a cameo. In his right hand, he had a dentist’s drill,

or something like it. His left hand steadied a small slab of rock with two layers, like a sandwich cookie with the top taken off. The “creme” layer was cut to a shape like George Washington’s profile on the US quarter — strong jaw, stalwart nose, deep-set eyes that gazed slightly upward, and the goofy white wig with curls in back. Banks, known to all as Mike, short for Michelangelo, was putting finishing touches to the bow on Washington’s pigtail.

“I bet this takes your mind to another place,” I said.

“I’ve lost many an afternoon,” Mike agreed.

“Is it hard to learn?”

“Not so hard,” he said. “The main thing is patience, and working carefully.”

He turned the cameo toward me. “Look here. I got started when I realized — looking at a quarter — a profile is mostly an outline. I had no experience as an artist, but I knew I could draw an outline.”

Turning the rock back to himself, he said, “The rock helps you along, by resisting, by making you go slow. The art of carving is bringing the picture out of the rock one slow sliver at a time.”

“Interesting. Do many rockhounds carve?”

“You’ll see examples over there in the display cases. The club has a class every year for beginners.”

“I’m feeling inspired,” I said.

“Take the class, so you learn to work safely. Rock dust kills.”

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Display cases come in two types: look-down and look-ahead. The look-down type is what you find in jewelry stores, with a god's eye view of pretty things below. The view into a straight-ahead case is like an old-time theater, where you see performers on the stage with a large space above them. Dramatists use the space above for Juliet's balcony or Peter Pan flying from London to Neverland. Rockhounds often use that upper space as a marquee, announcing the theme of the display on the back wall. However, some use the back wall to display supporting players behind the star of the show — like chorus singers hanging out of windows in a Busby Berkeley musical. Every rockhound show has a display case filled top to bottom with a papier-mache volcano. One day I hope to see a case with hanging stalactites and built-up stalagmites, so the case is transformed into a cavern.

At the RGMS show, the display case titled "Pinkie" filled its space with a spectrum of shades of just one color. Pink. There was a Mayan pyramid in the background built up in blocks of pink marble. Tall vases of rose quartz stood to one side, topped with garnet flowers. A rhodonite queen held court, her feathered cape hung wide on outspread arms. A pencil-like shaft of tourmaline was her scepter, and petals of pink spinel lay at her feet. The ID tag said the case had been submitted by a man, Ed Bailey.

The queen was an ingenious carving, simple and strong. The original rock had been oriented and cut in such a way that

rivers of black in the strawberry ice cream stone became the queen's mantilla of thick, untamable hair. The fullness of her hair rose from her forehead and temples, flowing away like ocean swells, Her eyes held two flecks of obsidian for pupils. Her eyelids were draped, like half-dome canopies over cafe windows. Her gown was a living map of rivers and valleys in pink and black.

"Here you are," said Sally, giving me a push of reproach for wandering off.

"Take a look," I said. "It's pink-mania in there."

"Let's see," said Sally, nose almost to the glass.

Sally has an uncanny talent for recognizing when coworkers have slept together. Usually it's a matter of how much or how little personal space one of them is comfortable with. Attentiveness, vocabulary, details they somehow happen to know, permissions they don't seem to need. As Sally likes to say, parameters change after you've seen one another naked. I don't know if Sally is always right, but I never assume she's wrong.

"Looks like Ed Bailey loves this girl Pinkie," she said, "a lot."

"Pinkie is a person and not just a personification of pink? Your facts, please."

"The case may seem like a salute to the color. But everything in there could be put together in an afternoon — except for one item, the queen. Carving the queen took dozens of hours, maybe hundreds with polishing. All those

details, the folds in her gown, the feathers etched into the cape, one by one. This is devotion on a scale that would make Eleanor of Aquitaine swoon.”

“Who’s Eleanor of Aqua Stain?” I asked.

“Eleanor of Aquitaine wrote the book on courtly love.”

“So the pink queen is someone real, and the sculptor was in love with her.”

“Without a doubt,” said Sally. “And they had sex.”

“Come on.”

“It’s obvious.”

“What is it about this pink and black queen in a cape that tells you she had sex with her artist-admirer?”

“First off, he doesn’t overestimate the size of her breasts.”

“What?”

“He has seen and admired them at leisure, so they are in proportion to other features of a body the artist has come to know well. Notice, in a pre-bra world, they point amiably outward, not forward like warheads.

“The queen has a mole near her left collarbone, and crow’s feet. I think our artist may have kissed the corners of her eyes many times and teased her about her fears of looking old. These are details you would only include if you treasured them in someone you loved.

“And notice the one shoe bulging slightly into the hem of the gown. It’s a spontaneous detail, unsymmetrical, taken

from life. The conclusion is inescapable: Pinkie posed for a sketch in a silky nightgown. That sketch guided the carving of this queen.”

“Amazing, Holmes!”

“Elementary, my dear,” Sally replied. Her last name is Heimkranz. Close enough.

“Is that all?”

“As you look at the pose, notice her bent elbows. An artist working strictly from concept would tend to make the arms straight and rigid, because that’s our idea of command. But a live model, holding a bedsheet on her outstretched arms for twenty minutes, might flex a little and maybe put her weight on one foot, and nudge the other foot playfully outward — thus!”

Sally threw her arms out, mimicking the Pinkie pose. Passers-by turned to see what was up. Sally smiled, happy to enrich their afternoons. She said, “Kiss me, baby.”

I did.

“Pinkie was a lucky woman,” said Sally into my ear, then adding, “unless, of course, she happened to be married to someone else at the time.”

Disentangling, holding Sally at arms’ length, I said, “Pinkie was having an affair with Ed Bailey.”

“Shshshsh!” said Sally.

“OK, tell me later. Let’s look at some more cases.”

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The other display cases were engaging but had nothing like the tabloid appeal in “Pinkie.” There was a case of “Day Trip Rocks,” showing agates and jaspers, marbles, geodes, and other goodies collected not too far from Reseda: in the coastal mountains; in the transverse San Gabriel and San Bernardino mountains, which shield Los Angeles from the wrath of the desert; and in the Cady and Calico mountains of the Mojave. This case was submitted by the wise owl of the RGMS, Doris Drusenberg.

In a satiric perspective, Lurene Pradera’s “Shells in the Desert” had in-situ photos and clay models of ancient sea fossils — that was in the left half of the case. On the right were shell casings left behind by weekend target shooters. The signage on the left said “Late Miocene, 6 million years ago”; on the right, “Anthropocene, last week.”

A display case submitted by rock-carver Mike Banks showed examples of work from last year’s carving class. An early assignment had students drawing lines and curves in howlite, a waste mineral found near gypsum mines. Another was to saw a leaf shape out of a slab of opalized wood and then give the leaf a rounded, lifelike surface, adding veins as a final touch. A third assignment transformed an assortment of beach rocks, each bearing a likeness of George Washington.

“Shall we join this club?” I asked.

“Let’s rock,” said Sally.

Chapter 2

Wired Weird

We found the Membership table at the front , near the hangar entrance. We sat in folding chairs to fill out an application. In addition to name and address, the form asked for occupation, hobbies, level of rockhounding experience, and memberships in other clubs. These questions led to a list of check boxes for Areas Where You Might Volunteer: photography, writing for the newsletter, website, workshop maintenance, field trip assistant, annual show staff, etc. There were check boxes also for Subjects You Want to Learn More About. The form was longer than a short form but shorter than a 1040.

The RGMS representative who sat across from us at the Membership table was a retired firefighter and looked the part. Beefy, buzz haircut, steady eyes. The name tag on his yellow and black RGMS vest said Ed Bailey.

I threw a side look to Sally: the same Ed Bailey who carved Pinkie? Sally's eyebrows went up.

Ed scanned our application. He leaned back and raised his hand, getting someone's attention at the Welcome table. He said to us, "I see you're interested in rock carving. We have a top guy who does our carving classes, Mike Banks."

I said I had just met Mike and liked him a lot.

"And you're interested in field trips."

“We’d like to learn about local rocks,” said Sally, “and where to find good rocks to collect.”

Ed took a breath. A rueful line formed above his eyes. “Fact is, gem-quality rocks are not as plentiful as they were in past years, the glory days.” Ed tipped his head to the side, as if he pictured old-timers with mules grabbing agates and opals by the handful. “I lead a field trip every month. We go to the desert or the coast, and there is still good material to find. And plenty of outdoors to enjoy.”

“That’s what we want,” said Sally.

“Once a year we try to schedule a longer trip. Five days or so to Idaho, Arizona, maybe Jade Cove. We haven’t been to Mexico in a while. Too dangerous now in the back country.”

“That’s a shame,” I said. “Do you find good material for carving on local trips? I was admiring your ‘Pinkie’ display case earlier.”

Sally bumped my shoe under the table.

“Thank you for saying so. Having ‘Pinkie’ in the show this year meant a lot to me.” Ed paused, allowing a freight train of feeling to roll by. “But, to answer your question, a good onyx for carving is hard to find anywhere nowadays.”

“The pink and black material?” I asked. “I like the way the streams of black become her hair in the carving.”

“That’s rhodonite. From Mexico.” Ed’s gaze shifted. He said, “Here comes Marianne.”

Marianne Avalone, newly arrived from the Welcome table, took a seat beside Ed Bailey. She had black hair, thick

and untamable. It was cut shorter now than in the “Pinkie” display case, forming a circle like a nimbus in a painting of adoration. Her eyelids were draped, not hooded, and crow’s feet appeared when she smiled, which was always. By the open collar of her shirt, I saw a mole, and I saw that Sally saw it too.

“This is Marianne Avalone.” Ed pushed our application form over to her for reference. “Marianne is editor of the RGMS newsletter, and she will be your new member guide. Your new member guide helps you getting started in club activities, and meeting people who are knowledgeable in your areas of interest. You’re lucky — Marianne is our best.”

“Thank you, Ed. You’re sweet,” said Marianne. She wore a wedding ring. “Truthfully, Ed is the best in SoCal for field trips. He’s out there every weekend, scouting sites and road conditions.”

The space between Ed’s chair and Marianne’s was not unduly close, nor was it unsociably far. Neither touched the other as they talked, and there were no lingering gazes or furtive glances. There were no sparks. There were no awkward icicles. It seemed they were acquaintances, part of a circle that included good friends, but they felt no more toward each other than ordinary good will. Either they were masters of deception, or we were missing important facts. Could Sally have read the “Pinkie” display case all wrong? I dismissed the notion out of hand. Sally was listening to Marianne.

“Welcome to the Reseda Gem and Mineralogical Society,” said Marianne. Her smile came naturally. It was a

smile that made you feel comfortable immediately, like a shot of rye. I cannot imagine what life would be like making people comfortable. With a glance at the form, Marianne said, “Welcome, Sally Heimkrantz. Welcome, Romeo Davis.”

Next came the Romeo question. Everyone asks if my name is really Romeo.

“If you don’t mind my asking,” said Marianne, “wherefore art thou Romeo?”

She laughed at having quoted Shakespeare. I laughed too. Sally went along. She has heard variations of this dialogue many times. For me, the interest women feel automatically on hearing that my name is Romeo — well, it never gets old. For Sally, it is a symptom of pie-eyed gullibility in me and in most of womankind.

“My mother was Rita Davis, an actress who loved everything Shakespeare. She played all the great roles, including King Lear in an all-woman production at Ashland. My mother loved the Bard, and therefore am I Romeo.”

“How interesting!” Marianne exclaimed, sharing her pleasure with both Sally and me. “Now, as Ed was saying, my role is to help you make connections in your areas of interest. Mike is the man for carving, of course, but you might also like talking with other beginners and intermediate students. Field trips are a great way to share an experience and get to know people. If you have a rock you want identified, ask Doris Drusenberg. She’s our senior member, and she knows them all. Also, be sure to visit our workshop for orientation, even if you

don't plan to polish stones or make jewelry. Suzette Sanger is the boss of the workshop, and she will show you how to cut slabs on a big saw — which we all need to do sooner or later. We're rockhounds, right? We can't help it."

Marianne took our picture for the newsletter. She asked about our jobs, other interests, travels, languages, unique experiences, encounters with celebrities...

"I ask so many questions because I'm a journalist," Marianne explained, "and because people keep giving me amazing answers. I freelance for *LA Weekly*."

To the job question, Sally answered, "I manage a marketing graphics group at HealthCore."

"Is that really satisfying, as a creative job dealing with the arts, or is it a soul-crushing treadmill in corporate Hell?"

Sally sighed. "Being a middle manager is the worst well-paid job in the world. But I have Romeo in my life, and we both like hiking, factory tours, collections in museums. We just went to the LA County Museum of Natural History."

"I know! The gem collection in the dark vault — with tiny spotlights — it's spectacular!"

"It's brilliant," Sally agreed.

"And many faceted," I added.

"Romeo, you're such a card. Tell me what you do."

I described my occupation as Business Planner for Regalo Properties, which means I attend to whatever my uncle Luis Regalo needs to have done. I go to client meetings, audit the books, fill in for the night watchman during a family

emergency, go pick up lunch when my uncle wants albondigas soup from Tranquilina's. I haven't murdered anybody. Uncle Luis hasn't asked for that. I am writing a novel. And I recently bought a 20-year-old flatbed truck with a vague idea of starting a traveling theater group, Reseda Pop-Up Players. We'll do scenes from Shakespeare and Euripides at lunch time for offices and school groups, and maybe some one-act plays by local writers. But my real vocation in life is being in love with a woman who loves me back. Sally and I commit every morning before we get out of bed. We talk about what we plan to make of the coming day, whether together or apart. Not all of this made it into my two-line bio in the RGMS newsletter.

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A birdcage made of 22-gauge, dead soft, stainless steel wire hung in the top left corner of the display case submitted by Marianne Avalone. The cage was empty. The door hung open. High on the back wall of the case, an epigraph in modern, black, italic letters read:

*...stone imprisoned,
Beauty set free...*

The case presented examples of wire-wrapping styles from left to right, from formal and fancy to eccentric and expressive. There were many more pieces on the right. The case floor was angled upward for maximum head-on viewing. The gathered schools of wraps rose from left to right like a graph of a great year on Wall Street.

The first group was a pair of identical plume agates, cut from successive slabs of the same rock. One of the agates was wrapped as Louis XIV might have liked, with a four-wire bundle encircling the stone and spreading at the top into a fountain of loops and swirls, with a bail for a necklace hidden somewhere within and the four wire-ends tucked out of sight. The other agate was more East German Apartment Block in style, with a groove around the perimeter holding a single heavy wire, with a ring on top that might have fallen out of a carburetor.

Next came the Stone-Sensitive Group. For oval and rectangular stones, the wraps were like picture frames, with the frame tending to be more modest when the stone had a strong “picture.” With stones of very irregular shape, the wire had to wrap across the face for engineering reasons. Face-crossing forays of wire became bolder and ever more pictorial as stones became trickier to hold. A jade teardrop became a bottle of Chianti with brass wire wrapped like straw around the base. A convincingly outlined apron turned an amorphous malachite into a peasant woman stooped to hard work.

The Hat Group dealt with excess wire by twirling it into headgear: a fez, a bowler, and a Stetson topped three apparently unoffended jaspers. The hats were part of a larger experiment in expressive wire, in which the stone was a collaborator or at times a mere canvas. Banded rocks lent themselves to Mondrian-like compositions with wire defining and linking geometric forms. Shield-shaped cabochons made up a Sir Dada

of Chivalry Group, in which wires-errant crossed, crowned, and crenellated any feature that could be taken for a heraldic mark — chevrons in marble, a broadsword-like pegmatite in basalt, a yellow Grail in brecciated jasper. In some of these pieces, it seemed the wire was so full of itself that it couldn't be bothered with providing a loop for a necklace. The bail was glue-on.

In the finale group, the very idea of stones being worn as pendants fell away. The cabochons became larger. The wire surged over stone like splashes of paint in the tantrum school of art. Wires emerged like worms from drilled holes and slithered along sediment beds, leapt over inclusions, and raced the rapids of twisting mineral veins. Across a slab of Graveyard Point plume agate, a frantic copper wire spiked like a heart monitor. The last piece was on a plain black slab of bassanite. A silver outline of a woman in funeral dress, her shoulders bent, her veil hanging forward, almost to her knees, was a portrait of grief.

Commenting on Marianne's case, Sally said, "It's as if the stone were found art, and the artist a tagger spraying wire."

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Marianne smiled unabashed, with crow's feet, when Sally asked about her display case. Sally loved the little hats, and Marianne said she loved them too and was thinking about other hats she might try, such as an Easter bonnet. Marianne added modestly that there were many wire-wrappers in the club who had far more experience and skill than herself.

"My husband Roy is one. His cabs won first place at the national level, zero deductions in all categories. Did you see his

case today?”

“Yes,” Sally said. “I don’t know anything about judging cabochons, but I could see they were clean and beautiful.”

“That’s Roy by the entrance, taking a turn as a greeter. He’s club president.”

Roy Avalone was a distinguished-looking man, tall and graceful, with a full crop of white hair combed back. He was much older than Marianne.

“You wouldn’t believe how strict the judges are,” said Marianne. “They ding you for the slightest fault, any asymmetry, nicks that can only be seen with a magnifying glass. Whew!”

“You titled your display case ‘Wired Weird.’ Is that to let traditionalists know you dance to a different drummer?”

“Yeah, but I’m a writer at heart, and I couldn’t resist that weird is an anagram of wired. Truthfully, I don’t think my stuff is weird at all. I think I’m the most normal person in the room.”

“Oh, hell,” Sally said. “I thought I was the normal person in the room.”

Marianne laughed and gave Sally a hug. “I’m glad you are joining the club.”

Marianne gave us an RGMS newsletter, a booklet of club rules and safety practices for field trips and the workshop, and an order form for RGMS hats, vests, and t-shirts. “Would you like to meet a few people, or is it enough for today?”

“It’s time to head home,” Sally said. “Hamish is waiting for his dinner.”

“If you wouldn’t mind my asking,” I interjected. “I was very caught up in Ed Bailey’s display case...”

Marianne seemed to freeze. Her smile was still there but the happiness had gone south for the winter. I went ahead.

I asked, “Are you Pinkie?”

An epoch passed. Then Marianne said, “Yes, that was a nickname for me a while back.”

“I’m sorry,” I said. “I see I shouldn’t have asked.”

Sally put her arm around Marianne’s shoulder. “Don’t let Romeo spoil things. He’s an oaf sometimes.”

“It’s all right.” Marianne pulled herself together, put a sociable face back on. “It was a rough time, all that, in the past now. Really, it’s a tribute that you recognized me from the carving.”

“We’ll say no more about it,” Sally promised.

“Thank you,” Marianne said, then added: “You did recognize me from the carving? You didn’t hear someone talking about it?”

“I recognized you from the carving,” I said.

“I feel silly, overreacting. The three of us are going to be good friends, I know it. So we’ll see you at the meeting — in two weeks. Be sure to come!”

She waved, as if we were departing on a voyage around the world and she had to stay home. We waved back, and made our way out the people-door.

Chapter 3

Tumbling

My office is a desk and a bookcase in a back corner of Regalo's Rockhound Shop. A barred window looks out to an alley and some parking, which cars share with a dumpster. Uncle Luis has a lapidary worktable at the front of the store. Pedestrians on Reseda Boulevard stop to watch through the picture window as he pries stones out of settings or puts them back in with tiny tools. His flip-down magnifying lenses make Uncle Luis look like a mad scientist, the headband gathering his hair like pampas grass. He comes into the shop a few times a week, getting away from the hectic pace of business at Regalo Properties. A bell rings over the door when a customer walks in — which can be several times a day during the busy season. Uncle Luis helps the customer find the rock tumbler to meet their needs. He scoops four grades of grit into paper bags and marks them as Rough, Medium, Fine, and Polish. He writes an itemized receipt on a pad with carbon paper, just as he did in the 1950s.

I was reading up on state and federal incentives for solar panels when Uncle Luis came by to ask about the RGMS show. He is a nominal member of the club and its unofficial angel, providing space once a year for the show and, in a building adjacent to the hangar, a permanent home

for the workshop. Uncle Luis enjoys being an angel, and his generosity brings tax benefits, since RGMS is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit.

“How’s Roy Avalone? Did you meet him?”

“Not to talk to, but he seemed good. We met his wife Marianne.”

“Oh, that young wife of his. Not bad, eh?” Uncle Luis grinned. “It goes to show, older men still have something to offer.”

“If you say so, *viejo*.”

“No, seriously, a man of years and achievement can be exciting to young eyes.”

“And the arthritic cracking to young ears.”

“Ay! But there’s another thing about Roy Avalone.”

“What’s that?”

“He’s an environmentalist hero. He wrote that book, *The Death of Death Valley*. It’s in the bookcase behind you, though you are too young and impetuous to notice.”

“Environmental hero and a writer — that sounds right for Marianne. She’s a writer.”

“I see the dawn begins to break in your young mind.”

“She and Sally hit it off right away. I almost made her cry.”

“*Cabron*, how do I trust you with my business?”

I told Uncle Luis about the Ed Bailey display case and the carving of Pinkie, and about our then meeting Ed Bailey

and Marianne Avalone.

“I am sorry for my friend Roy,” said Uncle Luis. “It’s a fact these clubs are a hotbed for romance. People join the club because of love, their love for rocks. They bring rocks to meetings and share their love with others. It’s no surprise if the next thing there’s magma.”

“Magma?”

“What you get from rubbing two rocks together.”

“I see.”

“But you know — now that I think about it, there’s no way Ed Bailey carved the pink queen in that display case.”

“Why not?”

“Ed Bailey couldn’t carve a turkey. He’s the field-trip guy, been in the club forever. Ed makes bolo ties.”

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The “Rock Tumbling” display case submitted by Luis Regalo was a regular at RGMS shows, appearing year after year. At the center of the display was a beginner’s 3-pound rotary tumbling machine, the best-seller at Regalo’s Rockhound Shop. There was no advertising in the case, but show visitors received a Welcome/Map brochure on arrival that included an ad for the shop and a discount coupon for the tumbler.

The all-rubber barrel of the tumbler was positioned so it nestled visually within the arc of a breaking wave in the background — an oil painting Uncle Luis commissioned

specially for the display case. The artist was a clerk at Magnificent Art Supplies, in the same building as Regalo's Rockhound Shop.

A card propped up against the tumbler read:

Tumbles with sand and water,
like the ocean, but faster

In front of the tumbler, like a spilled dish of hard candy, was an array of parti-colored rocks from Agate Beach, Humboldt County. Mostly they were almond-sized, a few large enough for skipping stones — red, orange, yellow, green, blue.

At the left, a platform showed stones “Before Tumbling.” They were dull in color but already rounded and fairly smooth, due to years of tumbling in the ocean before they were collected by beachcomber Luis Regalo. As he says to customers, “Let the ocean do the prep work. The tumbler at home peels off the outer layer, brings up the colors, and leaves a shiny finish.”

At the right, another platform showed “Best Stones to Tumble.” The example rocks were labeled:

- Hard (no cracks or crumbles)
- Super-fine grain (coarse does not shine up)
- Rounded (sharp edges cut other rocks)
- Convex (caves trap grit)

“Rocks are like people,” Uncle Luis likes to say. “Over the years, they get worn down. Rocks that work best and look

good in the end, they are the ones that are hard enough to hold up, but also roll well with others. No jagged edges. No crannies.”

The big-screen television that was the second prize in the RGMS raffle was donated by an electronics repair shop next to Magnificent Art Supplies, yet another tenant in the building owned by Regalo Properties.

+ + +

As a couple, Sally and I have developed a system for putting together jigsaw puzzles. I find and fit the outside pieces with straight edges while she works on the middle. This strategy gives me time to make coffee and microwave popcorn while she continues to plug in pieces with blebs in all directions. We chat, the three of us, Hamish having a chair of his own at the game table. Usually he just agrees with one or the other of us, with that tongue-dangling, happy-dog grin that West Highland White Terriers are known for.

“I’m looking for a piece with two yellow boobs,” Sally said, sorting through the pile of unstraight pieces. I joined in the search.

“That’s an unusual way to describe a jigsaw puzzle piece.”

“It will help focus your male mind.”

“I should resemble that remark,” I replied. “By the way, Uncle Luis agrees that Ed Bailey is not the one who carved Pinkie.”

“Based on what?”

“He said Ed Bailey couldn’t carve a turkey.”

I slid a puzzle piece to Sally that fit the bi-mammary in yellow description. She eyed it, nodded.

“What are we looking for next?”

“We are looking for anything that has this brick color.”

Sally pointed to the picture on the jigsaw-puzzle box. “So the question is: if Ed Bailey didn’t carve Pinkie, why is his name on the Pinkie display case.”

“Ed never said he did the carving,” I pointed out. “But he definitely knew the carving was in his case. He said the material was rhodonite that came from Mexico.”

Sally added, “And he said having the case in the show meant a lot to him.”

We pondered, and Sally sorted through puzzle pieces, flicking wrong reds to the side, corralling yellows and browns.

“It’s strange he didn’t say who did the carving, while we were talking about it.”

“A little strange. Maybe he thought you already knew.”

“How would I know? I’m new to the club.”

“Maybe he thought it was unimportant who did the carving. You were asking about good carving materials.”

“True,” I said. “Here’s another angle to consider: does Ed Bailey know that Pinkie is Marianne Avalone?”

“That’s an interesting question,” Sally said, looking up

from the puzzle. “Marianne wanted to know if we figured it out by ourselves. She was worried about gossip. It’s possible there hasn’t been any gossip. You and I might be the only ones who made the connection.”

“I don’t know, the likeness is pretty obvious. The hair, the crow’s feet, the mole.”

“Obvious to us because we studied the carving and then immediately met Marianne. The figurine is only seven inches tall. The resemblance is only there if you’re looking for it.”

“There’s a lot we don’t know,” I said. “I’d better make coffee.”

I went to the kitchen, Hamish on my heels. He gets a treat at evening coffee time. I set two *cafés au lait* in thick, diner-style cups on the game table, and posed another question.

“Does it seem improbable to you that a no-nonsense he-man like Ed Bailey would put together an all-pink display case?”

“Very improbable, even for laughs.”

“So not only is the carving not by Ed Bailey, the whole display case is by someone other than Ed Bailey.”

“Looks that way,” Marianne said. “Man or woman.”

“Then we’re back to why is Ed Bailey’s name on the display case.”

Sally lingered over a sip of coffee, holding its heat

near her lips. "Somebody asked Ed to put the case in the show. To ask that favor, the somebody must have been close friends with Ed. This close friend was having an affair with Marianne, so it figures Ed may have known about it. Why would Ed agree to put the case in the show under his own name? He's a practical man, not one to come between a bear and his honey."

The doorbell rang. Hamish leapt from his chair and skidded to the front door. He launched into a barking tirade, loud enough to face down a motorcycle gang. Hamish is very serious about his job as guardian of the gate.

"*Tranquilete*, Hamish," a voice called. "It's Luis."

Sally opened the door for Uncle Luis and welcomed him with a hug. He apologized for dropping in. He had papers for me that had to go to the city clerk's office in the morning. He pulled a treat from his pocket for Hamish, who knew it was coming.

"Would you like some coffee?"

"Sorry, Teresa's waiting," said Uncle Luis. "I see you're working on a jigsaw puzzle."

"Stinky TV night," Sally said.

"Jigsaw puzzles are good for relaxing the mind," said Uncle Luis, "although I cannot bear them myself."

"Really, *por qué no?*"

"So many little pieces," sighed Uncle Luis, "only one way they fit together. It's very *norteño*, if you don't mind my

saying.”

“I see what you mean,” Sally said.

“We were just talking about Ed Bailey,” I said, waving Uncle Luis to a chair. “Do you remember Ed Bailey having close friends in the club, or a best friend?”

Uncle Luis sat in the chair next to me. “Ed Bailey has been around forever. He’s on good terms with everybody.”

“Anyone stand out in your mind, someone he would share secrets with?”

“I see, you are thinking about the business with Roy Avalone’s wife.”

Uncle Luis deepened the wrinkles in his brow, pulled at his chin. “I heard he was tight with a new guy, kind of a rabble-rouser, Ken Tanaka.”

“How does anyone get to be known as a rabble-rouser in a rockhound club?”

“It’s been a while since I’ve been in touch with these things. I think Ken was very big on getting RGMS recognized as the number one rock club in the USA. The AFMS awards a trophy for that every year.”

“And wanting to be number one was controversial within RGMS?”

“Oh, there was a feeling Ken Tanaka wanted too many changes. People thought the club was fine the way it was.”

“But Ed Bailey took sides with Ken Tanaka.”

“I guess Ed thought the club needed new energy. The

leadership was a little set in their ways.”

“What kind of changes did Ken Tanaka want?”

“He was very focused on winning the AFMS award. So there were lots of little things he pushed for. He wanted everyone to wear their yellow and black vests to other clubs’ events. That was one.”

“Seems a little impolite,” I said.

“The idea was to get photographs of RGMS members supporting other clubs. The photos would make a favorable impression in the AFMS competition, according to Ken.”

“Was Ken Tanaka good looking?” Sally asked.

“*Guapa*, you could say better than I,” Uncle Luis replied. “To this day, I believe I am good-looking.”

“Of course, you are good looking, *tio*. Romeo is lucky I met him before I laid eyes on you.”

“You’re going to give me a heart attack,” said Uncle Luis. “Oh, you are working on the Grand Canyon.”

“One million pieces,” I said.

Eying the puzzle box, and gauging the pile of still-loose puzzle pieces, Uncle Luis said, “So many pieces. It’s a very big hole in the ground.”

Chapter 4

Geodes à-Go-Go

After food, sex, aversion to loss, and fear of humiliation, the strongest influence on human behavior is “aha!” A sudden realization feels good. It lights up the mind and leaves an afterglow of self-congratulation. “Aha!” is the reward you feel when you get a joke, solve a puzzle, have an epiphany, or discover the real reason why things are the way they are. It is also the sauce to scandal and gossip. “Aha!” is the opposite of “uh oh.”

Sally and I went to our first RGMS monthly meeting about two weeks after the show at the hangar. We stuck our heads tentatively into the big meeting room at the Reseda community center. There were rows of plastic chairs, a podium, and people milling around. Marianne swooped up to greet us, with hugs, and led the way to a hospitality table. Sally took care of the sign-in sheet while I drew two coffees from an urn that had known Eisenhower as president. There was a full platter of veggies beside two well pillaged platters of homemade molasses cookies and snicker-doodles.

“With people standing around in little groups the way they do,” said Marianne, “it can be hard to join a conversation. The hospitality table is a good place to catch people between groups. Over there, the display table is another watering hole

where everybody stops by before the meeting or at the break. Let's have a look."

Crossing the room, Marianne introduced us to several people whose smiles and welcomes were friendly and whose names swirled down the drain of memory before we reached the display table.

"I'm going to introduce you to Roz McCleggy. She knows everybody and likes to be helpful," said Marianne. "Two things to keep in mind about the McCleggys. The husband's name is James, never Jim. And never tell the McCleggys anything you don't want everyone to know."

"Got it," Sally said.

"On the other hand," I offered, "if there's anything of a social nature we want to find out, ask a McCleggy."

Marianne's happy expression sank like the sun in December. Someday I'll learn to just shut up.

Roz McCleggy was petite but hard as Brazilian agate. A boyish haircut made her head look round. She had two dramatic strokes of charcoal for eyebrows, and at the moment they were raised.

"Ed Bailey is threatening to resign as field trips chair," she blurted to Marianne.

"Impossible," said Marianne.

"It's true. He is furious about Del tampering with his display case. He told Millie he's sick of all the in-fighting." Roz McCleggy's gaze lingered on Marianne, weighing her reaction.

“I see,” Marianne said. “I’d better talk to Roy.”

Marianne excused herself and headed off toward the podium, asking Roz to “take good care of our new members Romeo and Sally.”

Roz turned to us with cat-like glee.

“Romeo? Really?” she purred. “But if you’re Romeo, shouldn’t you be Juliet?”

“I sent in the paperwork,” said Sally with a straight face. “Still waiting to hear back from Shakespeare.”

“So we still have to call her Sally,” I said.

“But your name is Romeo, legally?”

“It’s says so on my birth certificate,” I said. “But what’s the deal with Ed’s display case? The pink case with the rhodonite carving, right?”

Roz stared in wonderment. “You know about the pink display case.”

“We met Ed at the show,” I said, “when Sally and I joined the club. We talked with Ed about rhodonite, field trips, carving classes. Ed Bailey seems like someone who doesn’t lose his temper easily.”

“That’s true enough,” Roz said, “but Ken Tanaka was Ed’s best friend.”

“You say that like they’re not best friends anymore.”

“Ken Tanaka died last year,” Roz said. “On the field trip to the Calico Mountains.”

“Oh, no, that’s so sad,” Sally said. “What happened?”

“Ken fell from an escarpment.” Roz said. She paused for drama. “It was sixty feet, down a steep slope, all scree, nothing to grab onto. He landed on an outcrop of dacite.”

“Ugh, you’re not saying spikes, I hope.”

“Dacite is a type of volcanic rock with quartz,” Sally said. “It must have been awful.”

Roz reflected. “Ed took it hard.”

“Ed felt responsible, as field trip leader,” I offered.

“Ken Tanaka was an experienced outdoorsman. He knew how to stay out of trouble. It was just a brutal way to lose a friend.””

“I see.” I saw Roz felt real sympathy for Ed as well as satisfaction in ownership of Ken’s story.

“The display case you were asking about, ‘Pinkie’ — that was Ken Tanaka’s case, not Ed’s,” said Roz. “Ed entered Ken’s display case in the show as a memorial.”

“But why was Ed’s name on the display case? Why not Ken’s?”

Roz rolled her eyes. “Del Musselman, the show chair, refused the case under Ken’s name, on the grounds that only active RGMS members can be in the show.”

“That seems incredibly petty,” I said.

“Ed got around the rule by entering the case under his own name. He put Ken Tanaka’s name badge inside with an ‘In Memoriam’ card.”

“But something happened. Del tampered with the

case.”

“An hour before the show, Del opened the case and removed Ken’s name badge and the ‘In Memoriam’ card.”

“Why would Del go to so much trouble interfering in someone else’s grief.”

Roz gave me a level, life-is-hard look. “Del Musselman hated Ken Tanaka. Hated him the way a mongoose hates a cobra.”

“Time to find a seat, everybody,” a voice bellowed over the loudspeaker. A square-torso’d man with red stubble for hair and a rippling red beard stood at the podium. “Everybody find a seat, please, so the president can call the meeting to order.”

“That’s Del Musselman, right there,” Roz said.

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The “Geodes à-Go-Go” display case submitted by James and Roz McCleggy should have credited their grandson Boz McCleggy, a Caltech student in robotics. Their case was by far the most engineered attraction at the RGMS show.

A glittering geode hung from the ceiling like a disco ball. The case was lit like a nightclub, mostly dark with footlights shining up at three platforms. The platforms were turntables, rotating at 3.33 rpm, each carrying a baseball-size geode around and around.

The geodes on the turntables were off-center, out near the rim, so they orbited like planets around unseen

suns — except these planets were cut-through and hinged at the equator. Once per orbit, they opened wide to show crystal treasures in their cores, closing again as they turned away from ogling passers-by.

The geodes à-go-go were irresistible. Strangers jammed close together at the McCleggys' case to see the three geodes open their shameless mouths and bare their sparkly teeth, one taking its turn after the other, like a parliament of dragons. Home-schooling mothers urged their mooncalf sons to behold the wonders of earth. Low-key dads in football jerseys said to their bedraggled daughters in "Kill the Police" t-shirts, "Cool."

As one group broke up, another accreted at the magic McCleggy window. Mouths opening and closing, opening and closing. . .

A dozen virgin geodes lay waiting on the floor of the display case. A mini-poster in a corner read:

See for yourself!

Free geodes for Guests at next RGMS meeting!

The geode giveaway, we later learned, was Ken Tanaka's idea. The peak time for recruiting new members was the first RGMS regular meeting after the annual show.

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Del Musselman pulled at his rippled red beard while people sifted into the block of plastic chairs. When enough were seated, he waved for the RGMS president to come forward.

Del Musselman stepped aside and Roy Avalone took the podium, holding on with both hands and leaning into the microphone. After Del Musselman's bellow, Roy Avalone's voice was an amplified ghastly whisper.

"Can everyone hear me?" Feedback squealed through the sound system. Del Musselman laid a hand on Roy's shoulder for him to pause. He adjusted the volume control.

"Is that better?" Roy asked the audience. "I call this meeting of the Reseda Gem and Mineralogical Society to order."

Roy Avalone was the picture of a college faculty poet, with snowy hair, a thin alpine crag for a nose, and a soft crew-neck sweater. Over the sound system, his voice was loud enough and understandable but breathy and strained.

"Welcome. I see a number of new faces are with us this evening. Thank you for coming. We have an excellent program lined up, 'Owyhee Picture Jasper,' by Heinrich Blatt, our friend, a geologist, and fellow RGMS member. We'll want to hear too from our activity chairs about how it all went at the annual show last month.

"To facilitate the business of the meeting — and make my doctor happy, treating my chronic bronchitis — I will turn over the microphone to Del Musselman, past president of RGMS and our current show chair. Take it away, Del."

Resuming the podium, Del thanked Roy and went on to thank many others by name for the recent success of the

RGMS annual show.

“The turnstile count was 1,472 on Saturday and 1,255 on Sunday. The total attendance of 2,727 is up significantly from recent years, so it looks like our outreach campaign over the past year paid off. We should definitely continue sending RGMS ambassadors to schools, community groups, and other organizations.”

“Funny,” Roz said in my ear, “he hated the idea when Ken Tanaka first suggested it.”

“And now we’ll hear the treasurer’s report.”

Treasurer Millie Zhang was a human hummingbird, all sudden moves. She shot up from her chair, zipped to the podium, and seized the flexible neck of the microphone like a straw she meant to suck dry in a gulp. Pronouncing every word rapidly and distinctly, she made her report:

“Financial results from the annual show are subject to adjustment per late invoices and receipts. To date, expenses — including site rental, security, fixtures, technical support, safety, and transport to and from storage — are \$9,210. Receipts from the show — including vendor fees, raffle tickets, silent auction, and novelty sales — are \$11,260. On balance, we see a profit of \$2,050. Or perhaps I should say, since RGMS is a 501(c)(3) corporation, a nonprofit of \$2050. Thank you.”

Millie Zhang took a bullet train back to her seat.

“Good one, Millie,” said Del Musselman, transitioning to the next report. “Now, our membership chair Coral Finchum.

Coral, how many guests do we have with us tonight?”

Coral rose from her chair like the Sierra Nevada from the North American plate. People in her row leaned like affrighted cliffs as Coral pushed toward the aisle. Her slacks and jacket were beige. Rich auburn hair hung past her shoulders, brushed one hundred strokes every night. Her eyes were slitty and keen. Her voice was sweetness and light.

“Thank you, Del. We have 41 members signed into the meeting tonight, and 11 guests. Guests, will you stand, please. Let’s all make our guests feel welcome.” She started a round of applause for the guests.

“Please remain standing,” said Coral as the applause died down. “We have a geode as a gift for each of tonight’s guests, thanks to a donation from James and Roz McCleggy. If you’ll remain standing, please, Suzette Sanger, workshop chair, will come around to each of you with her bucket of geodes. That bucket must be heavy, eh Suzette?”

“Yo!” called the lanky and limber Suzette, doing a comic stagger with the heavy bucket in her outstretched hand. “But it’s getting lighter, one rock at a time!”

“We’ll need a guest volunteer,” Coral announced, “someone to help demonstrate how we open a geode. How about this young lady right here.”

A blushing sixteen-year-old was pushed to the aisle by two giggling friends, and coaxed toward the podium, where a white-haired man in a checked shirt and bolo tie juggled

three geodes with aplomb. This was James McCleggy.

With a slight country twang, which may have come with the bolo tie, James McCleggy said howdy to the meeting and asked the guest-volunteer her name, which was Yvonne, and invited everyone to contemplate the wonder that was a geode.

“It ain’t much to look at on the outside — a dirty old spud straight out of the ground. But crack it open, and you may find a crystal city inside, or a cluster of domes catching flashes of light.”

James McCleggy held an unsplit geode up high so everyone could see.

“What’s inside? There’s no guarantee we’ll find anything to dazzle the eye. There may be nothing in this rock but more rock. There is one thing we know for sure,” he said, sweeping the audience with a pointing finger.

“The one thing we know for sure is: when that rock cracks open, we will be the first to set eyes on whatever is hidden inside.

“Imagine a blob of magma flying out of a volcano millions of years ago. The blob became rounder as it flew, and it cooled in the air, turning solid — with a pocket of gas in the middle. Then, plop! The nodule hit the ground and lay in the muck surrounding the volcano, and over time it was buried under layers and more layers of rock and ash. The weight of the layers above generated pressure and heat, and

water seeped into the silica-rich hollow inside the nodule. Crystals formed, building up a magnificent structure with walls and windows to catch and refract the light of the sun.”

James McCleggy squinted at the geode in his hand. He shook it near his ear, as if listening for a rattle. He held it out toward the audience. “Is that what we’ll find at the center of this rock? Are we going to be witness to the first light that touches the wonder within? Well, heck, let’s just see!”

He put on safety glasses and handed a pair to Yvonne. He offered her a geologist’s hammer, with a spike to one side and a flat head to the other. “Would you like to do the honors, Yvonne, or should I?”

They stepped over to a prepared table with an anvil and protective see-through shield. Inspecting the apple-size nodule, James McCleggy found a spot he liked for “a good, clean hit.” With a quick, short stroke of the hammer, he split the rock. Handing the halves to Yvonne, he said, “Show the folks, Yvonne. Let them see!”

A few people in the audience stood to get a better look — was it a dud or a cathedral? And then the entire audience was standing and applauding. Yvonne rose to her celebrity moment, turning the halves of the geode, stained purplish with amethyst, to show off their flashes of light.

“The power of the reveal,” Sally said. “You can’t help but gasp.”