

I pressed my thumb on it as hard as I could. Although I knew that only some miles up the road was the Hiddenite emerald mine, I didn't fathom unearthing an emerald. My expectations were much lower. Caked-on dirt be damned, I just wanted to know if this rock in my hand would finally be a clear quartz crystal?! My heart raced. Rose quartz would be great too, though I'd never seen more than a few pink flecks on any rock unearthed, so far. Logic whispered, "This rock is probably yet another dark smokey quartz. There'll be no shine or shimmer or sparkle." My heart yelled back, "This time it will!"

I wiped the rock on my filthy shirt. I held it up. Sunlight fell flat on its surface, revealing nothing but dark murky hues. With a sigh, I dropped the rock on the pile, atop its brothers and sisters. For a moment, I looked with disappointment at my gnarled dig site. But then, like a bee landing on a pistil, a ping of excitement buzzed in my belly. An electric anticipation surged through my veins. I plunged my stick into the ground, twisting the dirt out of the way, with even more vigor than before!

At the exact time I was digging, there was another boy doing the same about four hundred miles northwest, near Columbus, Ohio. Like I, this kid was a highly energetic and precocious child, the type that would drive his mother crazy from time to time. His dig site was on an old worn-down hillside. Here, the boy studied the striations of the 300-million-year-old sandstone that marked the area. He searched for evidence in its grooves. He knew if he looked closely enough, these markers would point him to the hiding spots of the fossils scattered around. That boy's name was Rob Lavinsky, and he was following the clues wherever they led.

Rob was a feverishly inquisitive child and particularly so about fossils. By the time he turned eleven, Rob had accumulated a substantial collection, which he showed off with great pride wherever he could. These displays included his father's accounting office, where one day, Carlton Davis, a client of Rob's father, stopped by for a visit.

Carlton was in his sixties. He sported a double-breasted suit. His big bushy eyebrows and thick white hair gave the air of a gentle butler, a midwestern Alfred Pennyworth, if you will. Carlton's eyes immediately fell upon the various fossils that were displayed on the desk in front of him. "Where did you find those?" Carlton inquired. "Oh these?" replied Rob's dad. "You'd have to ask my son. He left them on my desk. He leaves them everywhere." Carlton's eyes gleamed as he gave a thoughtful smile. "I'd love to meet your son."

Not long after, Carlton and young Rob met for the very first time. Carlton appreciated Rob's infectious and energetic curiosity. Rob was excited to meet an adult he assumed had an interest in fossils. Rob imagined a sympathetic elder might be the perfect fossil-finding friend. He had no idea Carlton was about to reveal to him a new and unimaginable world.

Carlton was a well-known local mineral collector and an important and respected member of the Columbus Rock and Mineral Society. To begin, Carlton introduced young Rob to his numerous society friends. A kid had never attended their meetings, so the members quickly took to the boy. Rob enjoyed the attention.