

Telephone & Address Book

After my grandfather's death, I attend a working bee to pack up the contents of the house that he and my grandmother built in 1978. I fill a cardboard box with willow-ware teacups and saucers, my grandmother's carved wooden jewellery chest¹, a Victorian urn, an old chip-board clipboard, a yellow note pad, and a tall, narrow Telephone & Address Book, bound with black string which on closer inspection turns out to be a shoelace, tied into a bow².

The colour of the covers is a faded version of the shade of Moleskine diary that I order each year, a sombre navy that Moleskine euphemistically call 'sapphire blue'. In the centre, the words *Telephone & Address Book* are embossed in faded gold capitals. Beneath them is a drop of space punctuated by one ripple indicative of deeper rupture. Lower still the words, also in capitals *With compliments Sambild casings Pty Ltd. 60 Chifley Drive, E. Preston Phone 44 6249*. Under that, the words *Natural Sausage Casings*³. The blue lining at the top and bottom of the spine have worn away to reveal sepia-coloured subcutaneous layers. Just over halfway down is a larger damage in the lining, a gouged wound caused not by wear but some other profound, unknowable trauma.

When viewed in natural sunlight, the blue surface of the covers is marbled in places to a darker shade symptomatic of repeated handling, of the gradual transference of skin cells and oils derived from the constant touch of fingertips. Some deeper stains only visible in very bright light have more defined parameters, stains caused perhaps by tea or gravy, but having seeped so deeply within as to meld with the fabric, ingrained enough to have become an integral feature, not so much dirt as a form of evolution.

¹ which has first been ransacked by thieves in the night in the weeks after the death.

² Later that evening, my uncle's and aunty made their way through my grandfather's metal filing cabinet, reading and burning 40-50 years' worth of apparently unremarkable documents.

³ My grandparents owned a butcher shop.

When I remove the binding by sliding it off over the top, thereby preserving the bow, tied by other, older fingers, I find that the spine is broken. The inside covers are replete with my grandmother's writing, both as it once was, that familiar, original hand, and the fainter, shaky scrawl of later years. Also, vast swathes of white space containing the still yet later hand, incapable now of the act of handwriting.

The first item, up-side-down at the top of the left-hand-inside-cover is the initials J.L.P. and lists of upside-down numbers set out in six horizontal lines. Perhaps lotto numbers. They begin with two numbers denoting day and month, the birthday that my grandmother and I shared. Underneath, right-side-up in red ink the words 'St Vincent's St Michael's Ward' and a phone number. I can find no mention of the ward to locate its context in time and my grandmother's ailments⁴. There are other names, addresses in this no-man's land before the manuscript-proper. Names of the dead. A scrawled phone number for my uncle's ex-wife. Towards the bottom of the right-hand inside cover, my father's name and a P.O. Box number in Darwin. This entry I can place. 1989, the year that my father's butcher shop in Bendigo went bankrupt, and my father left to hunt buffalo in the Northern Territory.

The cascading index tabs down the right-hand side of the book have capital letters embossed in gold, the tabs progressively more dog-eared as they follow the downwards trajectory of the alphabet. From 'L' to 'Z' the little squares curl softly into each other, sleeping animals. Turning the page to 'A', it's immediately evident that my grandmother has chosen a more nuanced method of filing than that which the gold embossed tabs suggest. The first name, Kelly C— has a number but no address. The rest of the names listed on the left-hand side of the 'A' page begin with many

⁴ Breast cancer? Stroke? Heart Disease? Diabetes?

different letters, inscribed in no discernible pattern. Almost every entry has a diagonal cross scored through it, rendering it as obsolete, another address vacated, the crossed-out entries like static burial plots for time and events that have irretrievably ended. Lost time, as much as anything else. On the right-hand side there are fewer crossed out entries: the enduring names of country doctors, the tiny local hospital, now demolished, where both my grandparents would later die. A name and number for a solicitor. The railway station in a nearby town where you could catch the train to the city though I don't recall either of my grandparents ever enacting this journey⁵. The number of the police station where I sat to give my witness statement after witnessing the death of my father and brother. The number of my mother's best friend.

On the pages for the letter 'B', more entries, many diagonal crosses. Electricity companies. The German neighbour down the dirt road at the curve, George K—, with his pack of barking German Shepherds at the gate as we passed in the car towards the house my grandparents built when I was four years old. The number of a motel in Tailem Bend, South Australia, that must have marked the halfway point in long trips to pick up my cousin, A— from his mother's house to bring him back into the fold of his paternal family for school holidays.

There are clues to my grandmother's filing system, 'A' and 'B' both contain utilitarian contacts in no particular order. 'A' and 'B' might also be categorised as 'No-one loved is listed here'⁶. After that, reams of pages, letters have been left untouched; the rest of 'B', 'C', 'D', 'E'. Fifteen blank pages in all before the names recommence at the letter 'F'.

⁵ When I was born, my grandmother would have been about the age that I am now. What would I know of journeys?

⁶ Alternative possibilities for 'Ab' from The Oxford Dictionary: ab initio, adv. and adj. 'from the beginning'; or Abatude; 'something which is or has been diminished'; or Abditory; 'a safe repository for valuables, a hiding place', or even Abear...? *transition*. To endure, suffer, to tolerate. Now always with *cannot*.

Every name on the left-hand side of the first page of 'F' has been diagonally crossed out. The handwriting is embedded firmly as though absorbed into the weft of paper. These pages form crowds of people in the former shapes of themselves, their lives. First are my parents' names, the address of my childhood home in the Mallee, the number of my parents' butcher shop on that broad street. The field after this is taken by my auntie's name, along with her husband, an older house from early in their marriage. Underneath that, inexplicably, my parents again, the unaltered Mallee address, the same phone number of the butcher shop. My three uncles' names, their wives and historic dwellings and contact numbers. The address and phone number of my cousin A—. On the right-hand side, the names of my grandmother's siblings, my grandfather's brothers, these entries not crossed out nor marked as expired, but left intact, perhaps signifying firstly more stable addresses and later, absences requiring different forms of archival reverence.

This sensation of time passing.

On the following pair of pages, still filed under 'F', lesser degrees of family and friends are listed, cousins once-removed, twice-removed.

At the bottom of 'F', is a sepia stain where something was once affixed with dutex until such a time as the tape has lost all claim to adhesion and fallen off. Only the mark remains, a perfect imprint of its erstwhile purpose, though purpose itself is elided.

'F' spills over to the letter 'G'. My cousin A—, five years older than me has entry after entry, all crossed out, tracking a pattern of changing numbers and suburbs, inner-city places. My older brother's first address after he moved out of home, a suburb I have never been to. An address in Edinburgh, my aunt-by-marriage's parents. My mother's brother in Adelaide, close to the beach. Another 1989 address for my father, no longer a P.O. Box, but an actual point on a map in

Nightcliff, a phone number, the details seemingly gouged darker and deeper than others, written over the top of something else fainter, scribbled out, a palimpsest.



Later, the address in Alawa, Darwin where my mother, my twin brother and I lived with our father for a brief time, far removed from the rest of our family, before returning.

The gold embossed index tabs of the letters 'F' and 'G' are lightly browned, evidence of continued touch.

This section continues, cousin A— again, an Elwood address now, with an annotation, (*next to St Kilda Pier*). My older brother's address in Brunswick, the second to last dwelling before his death aged 25. On this page, also, my family's new address, a Californian bungalow in Northcote. On the next page my own name appears for the first time, but inscribed in my auntie's handwriting, accompanied by a phone number from years after I moved out of home, and no address, as though in the interval I have been at sea. Two more entries for A—, one written in my auntie's hand, the other in his own. Then an address for my uncle, my grandparents' youngest child. Below that a shaky hand almost unrecognisable as my grandmother's, a biographical note: *Baby A—* and the date of A—'s daughter's birth in 2002.

These blank pages full of silence(s).

The letter 'H'⁷ is a hybrid space. There are friends here as well as more family, new dwellings. Gaps and unwritten sites. More crosses. On the next page, A—'s address in Tennyson St Elwood where I once lived with him for a couple of months. My sister's address around the corner on a street bearing the same name as our childhood house in the Mallee. The first appearance of mobile phone numbers, elongated strings of digits, cumbersome and unwieldy for the brief empty fields of this Telephone & Address book, its equal allocations of space for area code as for phone number. My own handwriting. The imposition of several different hands, a thin crowd begins to gather, inserting themselves by necessity into this hitherto private space.

On the following page my grandmother begins to disappear. Other hands take over most of the work. An entry on the bottom right-hand sign is the only sign of her. I can hardly decipher my mother's name and the word 'shop'. Four numbers. Handwriting recognisable as my grandmother's yet also nothing like it. Evidence of great struggle. Of damage, desperation.

Loss /es.

At the beginning of the letter 'J', the first letter of his name, my grandfather becomes apparent for the first time. His handwriting begins to populate the fields. In this way, the blue book is somewhat linear in nature, tracing a journey reached via the turning of pages in succession. Two pages filled entirely with my grandfather's writing. People's changing addresses, phone numbers. Lives. On the right-hand side in my grandmother's barely recognisable post-stroke hand the word 'Shop' and a phone number, denoting the place that was formerly my grandparents', then my uncle and aunt's

⁷ Hurt? Healing? Heaviness? Herculean?

The registration number of their yellow Kingswood.

The registration numbers of three of their son's Ford Fairlane's.

The make and model of her vintage Bernina sewing machine.

It is only here, the penultimate set of pages before the white slip-road of back-inside-cover that the stitching holding all these pages together begins to come apart. Seams unravelled, fractured, brittle boned. Inside the (intact, spine unbroken) back cover, my grandparents' Medicare number; an indecipherable name and number; the model and manufacturing number of their stove. An inserted slip of paper, delicate, falling apart, another list of birthdays; a broken purple rubber band.

The right-hand-side of the back cover is completely blank. Like everything has been already contained. The end of a story. As though there is no need to waste this space, or this space is breath,
or its absence.