

My Address Book

It's a mess, but some of those outdated entries are precious.

After a recent day of spring cleaning, with my apartment smelling of Lemon Pledge and squeegeed of the excess crap that accumulates quickly in our lives, I stood flipping through my address book, wondering whether it wasn't time to finally clean it too. This address book is eight years old. It's slightly wider than a trade paperback, with a cover of cushiony vinyl and, in the upper right corner, *Addresses* written in fancy script. Its pages are loose-leaf and held together by a three-ring binder, which means I can take extras from, say, "Q," where I'll never use them, and put them in "B," where I will.

What needed cleaning, of course, were all of those outdated and crossed-out entries. My sister no longer lived in Cincinnati, Washington, D.C., or Atlanta, but Detroit. Brenda hadn't left Seattle, but I still had four addresses for her there, a gradual progression westward toward Puget Sound. Yes, some of the obsolete entries were still cool—Gore Vidal's fax number, Kurt Vonnegut's phone number, both perks of freelance writing gigs—but most reeked of failure: girls I'd dated badly, acquaintances who never quite became friends, business leads who never got back to me. I'd listed three contacts at Amazon.com alone—Kristi, Bob, and Bob—and none came close to getting me a job there (when you wanted a job there), and none worked there now.

Cleaning, for me, has always been

about the feel of a fresh start, and that's what I wanted now with my address book—the feel of a fresh start—and so after a shower I sat down at the dining table and tore out the first dog-eared, coffee-stained pages and began transferring, onto the clean, blank pages left behind, whatever entries were relevant. Until I got to the F's and Sharon.

There was a pattern to her addresses. After moving to Fort Worth, Texas, she rented an apartment on Bridgeview Drive

(1), until she bought a home on Weatherbee Street (2). After moving to Washington, D.C., she rented an apartment on Veitch Street in Arlington (3), until she bought a home on E Street (4). After moving to Chicago, she rented an apartment on Lake Street in Oak Park (5), until she could buy a home in the city (6). Except (6) never happened.

From the Oak Park apartment she phoned to tell me she had breast cancer. The following July I visited her, after the



By Erik Lundegaard | Illustration by Jim O'Brien

cancer had spread to her liver, lungs, and bones. Two days later she died. That was the F's.

In the T's, waiting for me, were Scott's addresses and phone numbers. Scott lived about a mile north of me on 81st Street in Seattle but moved to a suburb where it cost to call. Since when we talked, we talked for hours, arguing about movies and racial matters and movies, the phone bill added up. I teased him about it in early November. In late November he collapsed at the gym. A blood clot in the base of his brain. He died three days later. Four months after Sharon.

The three of us had worked at the University Book Store in Seattle in the mid-1990s. Sharon had been my boss, Scott my co-worker. I remember the clicking of Sharon's high heels as she walked into the warehouse. I remember Scott's bawdy sense of humor when it was just us guys and how gentlemanly he became whenever a woman's high heels clicked into the room.

Both, in a way, denied their true nature. Sharon insisted she was shy when she was the life of the party. She didn't know baseball as well as she pretended to, but she loved her Red Sox and hated them damn Yankees. She e-mailed me Yankee jokes and a humorous article called "How to Sing the Blues" (she loved the blues), and I responded with a blues song about and for her, which she said flattered her beyond words. Whenever she phoned her voice was sexy and flirtatious. It jumped through the wire and jangled my nerves. She insisted she wasn't sexy.

One time in the warehouse, Scott and I, bored out of our minds, contemplated which comic book character we'd be, and Scott immediately chose Spider-Man for himself. When I objected—"You're more like The Thing; *I'm* Spider-Man"—I didn't realize I was delving into something deep-seated. Asked to draw himself in a high school art class, Scott, ignoring his hefty frame, drew Spider-Man. And he had taken Peter as his confirmation name not because of St. Peter, but Peter Parker. Others in the warehouse quickly backed me up—"Sorry, Scott, he *is* more like Spider-Man"—but Scott dismissed us all and grumbled and griped the rest of the afternoon, particularly when, to annoy

him, I'd press my middle fingers against my wrist and make Spider-Man's web-shooting noise: "Thwip!" We were in our thirties at the time.

During our warehouse days, Scott wrote and illustrated a series of comics, "Colors in Black," about race in America, for the Dark Horse label. He once sent me an e-mail about the current state of movies: "I'm not starving for a black face on screen (I'm real hungry though), but I am starving for a multi-dimensional character on screen." After Sharon died he offered condolences, but the mention of her name made me feel empty and I didn't respond much. Sharon was precious then, because gone, not Scott. Then suddenly Scott was gone too. The lesson is obvious but hard to hold onto: Everyone you know is precious because everyone will go.

So I sat there, pen in hand, at the F's. Not including Sharon and Scott in my address book felt like a betrayal, but including them felt batty. At which address? For a minute or so I froze, unable to resolve this dilemma. Then I tucked the torn pages back into the address book and set it next to the phone again.

I'm sure, at some point, I'll recopy my address book without them in it. Just not yet.

Kurt Vonnegut, whose phone number I plan to keep, wrote about his brother, Bernard, in the prologue to his novel *Slapstick*. Bernard was a research scientist in Schenectady, New York, with such a sensationally messy lab that one day a safety officer bawled him out for it. "My brother said this to him," Vonnegut writes, "tapping his own forehead with his fingertip: 'If you think this laboratory is bad, you should see what it's like in *here*.'"

It's my answer to anyone who wonders over my mangled, messy address book in the middle of my pristine apartment. "If you think this address book is bad," I'll say, tapping my chest, "you should see what it's like in here." ■

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