

**The Names in the Case**

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After my mother's father died, from complications after an angioplasty, I was given a small suitcase, brown, solid, old, with a built-in lock. The case had been my grandmother's. Many years earlier, my grandmother had died from complications after two brain surgeries. She'd survived the first surgery and had a hinge put into a cut-out section of her skull to allow the surgeons present and future access. A year later, in 1980, the surgeons drained the fluid expanding against her brain. Post-surgery complications—perhaps a blood clot; there was no autopsy—killed her. I was ten when she died. When my grandfather died (in the hospital and, again, without autopsy), I was approaching thirty, married, father of two. I was in the hospital room with my mother and uncle (my mother's brother-in-law) when we removed my grandfather from the machines. He defied expectations by breathing on his own for what felt like days but might not have been more than an hour. He choked and gasped, unconsciously, until he lost his strength, suffocated, and died. My mother wept. My uncle cried. I did not. I'm not sure why. Perhaps I had made my peace with his life.

I had come to Chicago on business several times over the past years and usually arranged a visit with my grandfather. I'd watched him beat the odds of his physical health (the consequences of decades of alcohol, red meat, and cigars) and survive, year after year, but I'd also watched him decline. I knew that he knew he was living on borrowed time because he would tell me. He had outlived his money. He had outlived his desire to live. He would offer me whiskey from nearly clear bottles he'd watered down, to conceal his drinking, and when I would decline, he would offer me twenty dollars, and I would have to accept or risk bruising his ego. Then he would tell me that he never expected to live this long, and I would slip the twenty-dollar bill into a junk drawer by the kitchen's rotary phone. He would give me cassette tapes of him-

self singing, the nightclub kind of crooning he'd always wanted—but never had the nerve—to do. He'd never read much I'd written, but he knew I was a writer, maybe hoped I'd make his life into a story, real or imagined. I still have the audio tapes he made for me. And I have the suitcase.

The suitcase tag has my grandmother's name and address on it. The suitcase is heavy, sturdy, stitched, and reinforced with some kind of metal in its walls, with rounded rectangular edges. It resembles a brass musician's instrument case, vintage, impregnable, something that would withstand the rigors of life with a touring jazz band or, for that matter, with my grandfather, who, escaping creditors, moved his family across the country, from Illinois to Arizona and back again. My mother and her sister endured different schools every year. My grandfather had been a Merchant Marine and a pharmaceutical salesman, but mostly he'd been a bartender and a violent drunk, disappearing for days or weeks and, on his brutal returns, scaring his daughters into hiding beneath their bed. He loved singing "Danny Boy" and sang for posterity on my wedding video. A badge bears the manufacturer's name, Skyway, in script metallic lettering and is glued beneath the locking mechanism. My grandmother's initials, V.J.Z., are embossed in faded silver below that. Skyway, founded in 1910, is still in business.

It appears to be a woman's traveling case. On the inner lid are two puffy elastic pockets of the same deep-purple material as the lining. These two pockets embrace an otherwise loose, removable cosmetic mirror. An inventory of the odds and ends inside reveals: an old smudged lock, without its key, made by the Independent Lock Company of Fitchburg, Mass.; interlocked rings of tarnished keys; the two suitcase keys, miniatures as if for a doll's house, on a safety pin; a cheap glass ashtray rimmed in some thin metal, maybe tin; a stack of unused holiday cards with pink elephants on their covers; five family photographs, color, including one of my grandfather, myself, and my year-old daughter, a photo that memorializes the only time my grandfather ever met one of my kids; a Monaco cigar box of assorted matchbooks, including ones from Full House in Hanover Park, Great Godfrey Daniels in Skokie, Up Down

Tobacco Shop in Chicago, The Parthenon in Chicago's Greektown, and the Playboy Clubs of Buffalo and St. Louis, these latter matchbooks being manufactured in Chicago; a strange letter from a family friend or relative; two letters, printed out by computer and stapled, from the organizer of my grandfather's 60<sup>th</sup> high-school reunion, who typed, to everyone, "I was going to say, 'Be good,' but at your age, I know you are being good," and who handwrote, to my grandfather, "We missed you. Hang on for our 65<sup>th</sup> or 62<sup>nd</sup>!"; and, finally, a small ivory snapshot case, a clock inset atop its lid.

This last case appears to be a jewelry case, or perhaps it is intended to secure the bedside necessities of a traveler: glasses, earrings, pen, etc. The case is narrower than a paperback and heavier than a bible. On the clock's face, which is tinted an ugly, nostalgic olive gold, is printed, "New Haven." The back of the clock protrudes into the inner lid. The knobs allow for winding the clock and adjusting the time; there is no wake-up alarm. Inside the case are: cufflinks; a plastic nametag with Joe, my grandfather's first name, engraved on it; a black button; two ball bearings; a costume-jewelry pin; two tiny nuts fallen from the tiny screws securing the clock to the lid; a black-bead necklace with a cross of Jesus Christ (my grandmother was Polish Catholic); a nickel-sized pin from the Chicago Bartenders Union AFL-CIO Local 278 (my grandfather used to tend bar in the John Hancock building, among other places); and a haphazard collection of business cards, collected, presumably, by my grandfather.

It is these cards, finally, that interest me. They suggest a history of relationships, a past peopled by acquaintances and friends about whom I know nothing. I never met any of them. Some may be men my grandfather knew well in his social circle or briefly, perhaps for a single night, as a bartender. They are insurance representatives and doctors, salesmen and relatives. (One card is my own, but I'm not counting that one.) I have always wanted to somehow catalog these twenty-seven cards, to arrange them in a way that suggests an

impression of my grandfather's past or even, I admit it, an evocation of the past in general. The cards are skeletal and random at best, underequipped for the documentary task I want to impose upon them. Still, I record some because what else can I do with them? They are enclosed inside a case within a case, and no one else, now, is struck with the impulse to preserve them. Listing them is a poor substitute for the experience of fingering through them, one at a time, comparing age and wear, the typography, the scribbled notes on their white spaces and backsides. Men handed these cards to my grandfather. Under what circumstances? How many of these men meant something to my grandfather? Are these men (they are invariably men, judging by the names) living or dead? More than a mere twenty-seven men must have handed my grandfather their business cards during his many years as a bartender, let alone his entire life. So why did he keep these particular cards? A couple are obviously the doctors he was seeing at the end of his life. But others are just as obviously decades old, stained, pocked, cut, as translucent as skin. Look at their jobs, the companies they worked for, their names. What lives did these men lead? How many of them kept my grandfather's card? Did my grandfather even have a card? There is more I can say, but perhaps this catalog and its exegesis only have meaning for me. And what is that meaning anyway? And if I ever define that private meaning in any definite way, how can I convey something of it to anyone else? Most grandsons receive a portion of their grandfather's personal effects, left to them intentionally or, in my case, unintentionally. These are business cards that happened to be in the possession of my grandfather, that happened to be locked in my grandmother's Skyway luggage. These are names in a case, orphans on my doorstep, people from a past that is theirs to know and mine to imagine. It is imagination, I think, that is stirred up by these cards, these bare records of men my grandfather knew. Never intended as epitaphs, they are something else. They are something that makes me heartsick to live only one life, to be denied so much history, to have only one name to give.