

Foreword
Found Object

It arrived in the mail, carefully packed in bubble wrap. Same trademark, same size, same smooth leather, but redder, softer, with a well-used sheen.

He'll like this, I thought, maybe even better.

He had just lost a small Hermès diary, newer than this one, but somehow ageless from constantly sliding in and out of pockets. Engraved with his initials, T.D., it was a kind of talisman to which he'd been attached, practically, physically, sensually.

As always when he loses something, which happens regularly, I had to help him look. Passport, keys, phone: generally I find them fairly quickly. But this time the diary could not be found. After several days, T.D. resigned himself to buying a replacement.

"Sadly, that kind of leather isn't made anymore," the salesclerk answered, vaguely apologetic, politely definitive. Others might have settled for full grain, striated, or crocodile. But T.D. never gives up. His lucky find showed up on eBay under "small vintage leather goods." Seventy euros. And a few days later it arrived.

Obsessive behavior is a contagious disease; in his absence I wanted to verify that the found object really was an exact replica of the lost one. I inspected it from every angle. Then I opened it.

The seller had removed the annual diary refill where the former owner must have noted appointments, invitations, or secrets. But a small index for telephone numbers remained, slipped into the inner

pocket. Without thinking, I began to leaf through it. I must have been a bit distracted because it took me three pages before a name caught my eye: Cocteau! Yes, Cocteau: 36, rue Montpensier! I remember a shiver running down my spine, then the breathtaking discovery of Chagall: 22, place Dauphine! I flipped wildly through the pages: Giacometti, Lacan . . . Here was the whole lineup: Aragon, Breton, Brassai, Braque, Balthus, Éluard, Fini, Leiris, Ponge, Pouence, Signac, Staël, Sarraute, Tzara—twenty pages on which the greatest postwar artists were listed in alphabetical order. Twenty pages I had to read over and over to believe. Twenty astounding pages, like a personal telephone directory for Surrealism and modern art. Twenty pages I gazed at in wonder. Twenty pages that I touched softly, hardly breathing, afraid they might self-destruct or fade like a dream. And at the very back, to date the treasure, a 1952 calendar, proving that it had been purchased in 1951. Never again would I scold T.D. for losing things.

Now, of course, I wanted to know who had written these names in brown ink. Who could have rubbed elbows with these twentieth-century geniuses? A genius, clearly!

To be honest, I should admit that I had no say in this. I did not choose this address book; it burst onto the scene, imposed its presence, imposed itself on me. And here I was, trapped, unable to resist the call of these names, like a police dog offered the scent of someone who is missing: *search, search*.

I was hooked before I even knew who was hiding behind this handwriting. Intrigued by these friends, knowing nothing of the life, I was chasing a ghost. I didn't know the ghost's name, but the pages were like a small keyhole through which I could peer at a world long vanished and like no other.

Michele S.
Hameau de la Chapelle
Cazillac

The postmark showed that the package had come from Brive-la-Gaillarde. How could such Parisian addresses come from Brive-la-Gaillarde?

The ad on eBay noted that the seller was an antique dealer located in a hamlet about thirty kilometers from Brive, in Cazillac, a charming Lot village in the green valleys of the Causse de Martel. Cazillac, with less than five hundred inhabitants, known (a little) for its Romanesque church, twelfth-century tower, wash houses, a bread oven, and the Sauvat cross that symbolically marks the forty-fifth parallel, the halfway point between the equator and the North Pole. That's where my address book came from! A forgotten place on earth, but exactly in the middle of our hemisphere.

I did find the name of a Surrealist artist who came from that area. But who would have known Charles Breuil? Not Breton, apparently, or Braque, or Balthus . . .

Edith Piaf was also a frequent visitor to the Causse de Martel. In the 1950s, "The Little Sparrow" (la Môme) returned many times to a rest home a few kilometers from Cazillac. At sunset she went to pray at a small dilapidated church perched on the cliffs. She was even said to have paid for the restoration of its stained-glass windows, swearing the priest to secrecy during her lifetime. So was this Piaf? She had been friends with Cocteau, she knew Aragon during the Liberation, and Brassai had taken her photograph.

But in a speedy response to my first message, the seller of the address book put a quick end to all speculation regarding Piaf and Cazillac: “Many years ago, I bought a lot that included two Hermès diaries during a wonderful auction in Sarlat, in the Périgord. I know nothing more about them, but I do know the person in charge of the auction house, and I can ask him if he has information on the sellers. I can’t make any promises, but I’ll keep you posted.”

A month later, she kept her promise: the seller was a woman from Bergerac who apparently delivered the diary herself, along with other items, to the auctioneer. Michèle S. also remembered the exact date of the auction: May 24, 2013, in Sarlat. She suggested that I contact the person in charge of the auction house to learn more. But he proved difficult to reach, on vacation, busy, obviously unmoved by the romance of the found address book: “I hardly know this pair of sellers, especially since they recently moved very far from this area. I think it’s likely that either their ties with the former owners of these diaries are nonexistent or that they don’t want to hear about this.”

Clearly he himself had no desire “to hear about this.” In a few sentences, and then two or three brusque phone calls, he tried his best to bar access to the former owners.

To cajole him, I told him that my father had also run an auction house. And I wasn’t even lying! As a child I had spent entire days there, playing among the Formica furnishings and Provençal armoires, opening rusty iron boxes and creaking drawers. I always hoped for a treasure hidden among the old albums, in the jumble of pocket watches and keys, or under the piles of sheets still stiff with starch. I remember the slightly acrid odor and the clouds of yellow sawdust escaping from wormwood. It was there I heard about “vacant successions.” The fate of those who died without family distressed me, their furniture scattered one Saturday morning to the four winds. I remember bids of one franc, lots for five francs, my father who seemed to be playing with his gavel, shouting “Going, going, gone!” and the buyers ecstatic when their bids won. One of his friends called it “the poor man’s casino.”

I did not let up on the manager of the Sarlat auction house. I promised him that I knew his trade, I understood his ethics, I sympathized, I simpered. He would not bend. It was impossible to get from him the new address of the sellers, or even any information on what other items they might have delivered to him. He agreed only to forward a letter to them, to which they never replied. And he stopped answering my messages as well: "It's a delicate matter that I cannot 'legally' push further without incurring possible complaints." Legally speaking, I knew he was right. My father confirmed it: "The name of the seller must remain confidential." This was, I think, one of our last serious conversations. He only found it surprising that there should be so much mystery around a simple address book. He would have been more accommodating. Then he added with a smile: "After all, it's not a Picasso, this little thing of yours!" Well, why not? I checked. Sadly, the handwriting looked nothing at all like Picasso's.

But intrigued by his remark, I returned to the last message from the auction house manager and considered it more carefully. Why tell me that he hardly knew this couple? He knew them well enough to know that they had moved "recently" and "very far from this area." And he must have called them if he could state with so much certainty that "their ties with the former owners of these diaries are nonexistent" and that "they don't want to hear about this." Why such secrecy? And he asked no questions about the address book. In fact, he seemed embarrassed by mine.

He had no idea how much energy someone as stubborn as I am can devote to a mystery that falls in my lap. Little did he know the treasure I was holding! The door to the Sarlat auction house could well be closed to me, but my address book remained opened to the most fascinating world imaginable.

An explanation was bound to exist. There had to be a reason why, one day in Bergerac, someone had come upon this red leather case and decided to sell it without thinking of emptying its contents. Perhaps it was enough to locate Bergerac on a map: subprefecture of Dordogne, in the center of "Purple Périgord," only one

hundred kilometers from Bordeaux, Brive-la-Gaillarde, Cahors, and Angoulême, but more than six hundred kilometers from Saint-Germain-des-Prés. Who could have lived or died in Bergerac, and also known all the notables of Paris?

Wikipedia lists a certain number of “figures linked to the district” who might have visited the geniuses in the address book in the 1950s:

- Desha Delteil, “classical American dancer famous for her acrobatic postures”
- Hélène Duc, actress
- Jean Bastia, director and screenwriter
- Jean-Marie Rivière, actor, theater and music hall director
- Juliette Gréco

None of these profiles really corresponded to the address book entries. Not even Juliette Gréco: her 1951 address book would have included instead the names of Sartre, Vian, Kosma—this was not exactly her world.

But I would find out sooner or later. I would not give up. I would learn who had owned this address book.