

Pockets

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by Sharon Cairns Mann

Ms. Xi starts on the basket of clothes that had arrived this morning. When you're the second-generation owner of a dry cleaning business, you know the most important job is to empty the pockets first. This was not a job for the new girl. Not now. Maybe not ever. Lipstick, crayons, pens, tissues, and gum are the bane of the business. She couldn't trust anyone else to make sure a pernicious crayon didn't ruin a load, or worse yet, a machine.

The truth is, pockets make Ms. Xi's day; pockets triumph over the monotonous toil, the smelly chemicals, the imperious customers. Pockets spill forth the unexpected, the ordinary, the bizarre: love notes, money, keys, lists, receipts, paper clips, rings, aspirin. Pockets tell stories, hold clues about the lives of customers, most of whom she hardly knows. Who needs to turn on the TV when she has her own stories right here? No, the deep thrill of pocket reconnaissance belongs to her. To her alone.

Today, Ms. Xi extracts a creased paper from Mr. Shane's pocket and carefully unfolds it on the counter. Another poem. Ms. Xi reads the lyrical words and tries to picture them coming out of the heart of the short, bald-headed man with the large fleshy growth on his temple. Ms. Xi sighs and puts Mr. Shane's poem in a tiny plastic bag and files it behind his name in a file.

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"Mr. Shane," she will say tomorrow, handing him his dry cleaning with a little plastic bag holding the poem taped to the order. "Mr. Shane, please try to empty pockets." And he will say, as he always does, "They're for you, Ms. Xi. I write them for you." And she will throw her head back and laugh.

Ms. Xi carefully, dutifully places any coins or bills she finds in a large glass jar on the counter labeled "Children's Relief Fund." It is too much work to try to track and return money to its rightful owner. This way, they can all feel good: it is going to a worthy cause. Every December, she faithfully tallies up all the change collected over the year and sends a check

off to the Children's Relief Fund. She makes a copy of the check and the receipt from the charity and tapes it to the cash register. She wants everyone to know how honest she is.

But the grocery lists? The receipts? The parking stubs? You'd think, she tells herself, I would simply throw it all away. Instead, she

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puzzles over it all, reading the tea leaves of her customers' lives, trying to divine the whole. And then she carefully stores the detritus of lives in clean, 55-gallon drums in the parking lot behind the building. She had filled six drums. Six drums in 25 years. Six drums with the tiny secret silt of lives. Of course, she throws away the rabbit pellets, cookie crumbs, and cough drops. But the screws, wrenches, batteries, erasers, handkerchiefs, and carpenter's pencils go into the drums,

along with the letters, the notes, the lists, the receipts.

The letters. Was this one going to the wife? Or had he purloined it from his wife? Or had he written it to his own lover?

The notes. "60/2 = 30 = 3 x week for 20 weeks or 1 x week for 60 weeks = 5 to 12 months of relief."

The lists. "Stop for bread, kill Johnny, get gas."

The foil-sealed prophylactics. The number of people who carry them in their pockets as if ready to drop their pants at a moment's notice amazes Ms. Xi. She places all the condoms in cigar boxes neatly stacked in her storeroom. She has tried to take them to Planned Parenthood, but they politely decline: for health reasons they cannot accept donated condoms. What will she do with them? She can't bear to throw them away. And clearly, she can't let the new girl find condoms.

The photos. The crumpled image of a smiling couple. Why was it wadded into a ball? Had they meant to discard it? Was it anger? Grief? Simple resignation?

Only Ms. Xi can remember which stuff belongs to which person. Only she can be trusted with important personal items like eyeglasses and watches; only she can be trusted to be the guardian of people's trash

and treasures, to cull through their secrets, to be discreet, to return what should be returned and keep what shouldn't.

The diamond ring she found in 1992? Only she can be trusted to slip it into the pocket of the teenager whose girlfriend was pregnant. Only she can be trusted to fold \$20 into Ms. Cameron's pocket, because her child has leukemia. And only she can slip a poem into Mr. Shane's pocket, a poem she has toiled over in her office between customers or late in the evening, a clandestine reply in an unbroken chain of secret correspondence exchanged for the last five years. No, the new girl won't do at all: at least not for emptying—or filling—the pockets.