

Meet 'Trish.' She's a living list.

By Patrick T. Reardon
TRIBUNE REPORTER

Grocery store shopping lists can be windows into the soul. Consider one on a torn scrap of red paper, containing a handful of misspelled items including "gravey" and "liqor, liqor, liqor, liqor." Or another for a variety of fancy lunch meats, written on a Prozac note pad.

Or a third on the inside of a matchbook cover reading simply: "Coors, Oreos."

Those lists and 23 others were the inspiration for Hillary Carlip's new book, "a la Cart: The Secret Lives of Grocery Shoppers" (Virgin), a gloriously idiosyncratic project that taps into the deeply human pastime of daydreaming about the lives of others.

For each of the 26 lists, Carlip, a Los Angeles-based actor, writer and performance artist, envisioned the person who wrote or used the list — man or woman, black or white or Hispanic or Asian, senior or teen, poor or wealthy, pretty or plain — and then dressed up in that role. After being photographed at a supermarket in character, Carlip wrote a back story about the shopper and his or her trip down the grocery aisles.

"I was always fascinated by how much you could tell about a person from their list," Carlip says. "It was this intimate glimpse into someone's life."

Carlip is one of those people who seem always to be looking at life from a somewhat askew angle. Indeed, her 2006 memoir is titled "Queen of the Oddballs — and Other True Stories from a Life Unaccording to Plan" (Harper).

In that book, she writes about her triumphant appearance on "The Gong Show" as a mildly naughty juggler. And her stint as the lead singer for what was billed as an all-girl, all ex-con band called Angel and the Reruns — even though none of the women had ever spent a moment in the slammer.

But it's Hillary Carlip, the shopping list



Hillary Carlip collects grocery lists, imagines who might have written them, then acts out the parts. But she never had been able to compare one of her characters with the real person until we introduced her to the woman whose list (below) became "Trish" (above).

» CARLIP

queen, who, on a recent visit to Chicago, sits down one morning to talk about her book. She's short, almost tiny, with curly brown hair and a quick smile.

In "a la Cart," she writes that she was a teenager when she discovered a discarded shopping list in a Safeway supermarket cart. It listed items such as Sara Lee German chocolate cake, Pepperidge Farm coconut cake, Van de Kamp's orange rolls, Van de Kamp's windmill cookies.

Immediately to mind jumped the image of Betty, a bridge-playing, beauty parlor-haunting matron whose only vice was a secret smoking habit.

"From then on," she writes, "I've been obsessed with collecting these snapshot scraps of human nature."

Now, in more than a dozen file boxes at home, she has 2,000 to 3,000 lists, some

found by friends but most snapped up by Carlip on trips to the grocery. "Whatever market I go to, in the parking lot, I look at all the carts," she explains. "I've been known to peek in the trash cans."

She also collects anonymous family snapshots and diaries. Like many of us, throughout her day, she tries to piece together stories about the people around her: "I was at breakfast this morning and spent the whole time watching this couple that didn't look like a couple. He had a mullet, and she was an older Latina woman."

While embodying the 26 people in "a la Cart," ranging in age from 11 to 85, Carlip says she found that going to the grocery store dressed as someone else gave her a sense of being inside the other person's skin.

When she was there as Pammy, a former porn star, men tripped over themselves to help her with her

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— Hillary Carlip

purchases.

But, as Karen, a veterinary assistant, "I felt kind of invisible. I was perky as Karen would be, but that's how I experienced what it was like to be her — lonely and invisible."

The experience of doing the book, Carlip says, has been surprisingly enriching.

"It feels," she says, "like these were people I hung out with rather than I was them. They're people I've come to love — all of them."

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How Hillary + Elaine = 'Trish'

Hillary Carlip's book "a la Cart" — in which she envisions and embodies the writers of 26 shopping lists — is so much fun that Tempo asked her to tackle a 27th, just for our readers.

We sent her lists that 10 Tribune staffers had used in recent trips to the store. Not knowing anything about any of the shoppers or where we got the lists, she chose one and worked her imaginative magic.

The result is "Trish," the well-organized businesswoman in the black suit, talking on her cell phone in the large photo above.

Most of the lists we sent to Carlip were typical of the genre — random pieces of paper on which items were scratched and scribbled, often in different colors of ink.

But one, she says, really stood out: a rectangle of paper from a daily planner on which were listed, in perfectly formed handwriting and in neat groupings, items ranging from Brillo pads to flatbread. (In fact, before sending the lists to Carlip, several of us had commented that this particular one looked like a collection of haiku.)

"It was so specific when I saw it," she explains during a recent interview at the Tribune offices. "Not many people do their z's like that. It felt like all-business. I could really see the person. I saw the planner."

Then Carlip gathered the outfit, as she did for each person in her book, from the racks at thrift stores and had her photo taken in character by Barbara Green, who was also the "a la Cart" photographer. "It wasn't until I had become her and embodied her that the name 'Trish' came to me," she says.

If she had been planning to include Trish in her book, Carlip would then have written a short sketch about her. But, now, for the first time in her decades of shopping list collecting, she is going to have an opportunity to meet the person who wrote the list.

Into the room walks Elaine Matsushita, the editor of the Tribune's Home & Garden section, and Carlip gets to see the woman she imagined as Trish.

Matsushita gets to see, for the first time,

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brillo
garbage bags
ziploc's
milk
juice
bananas
apples
yogurt
granola
peanut sauce
red peppers
green onions
salmon
parsley
cilantro
chuse
flatbread
bread

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the photo of Trish as Carlip pictured her from the shopping list.

They're both delighted, sort of. Awkward, a bit. And very curious.

"Do you wear your hair up?" Carlip asks. Matsushita reaches back and shows how she often pins her hair back. "That's just how I did it in the photo," Carlip says.

"Do you wear glasses?"

Matsushita says, "I have a lot of reading glasses."

The two women are getting into this. Carlip asks about the method used in grouping the items on the list, and Matsushita says, "I start with the things I might forget. Like Brillo. I don't buy that every day. Sometimes, I group it by meals."

Scanning yet another time the photo of Trish, Matsushita says she doesn't think of herself as being as organized as the woman Carlip conceived.

But she says, "I think it's close. I think there are a lot of facets to me."

She pages through Car-



Tribune photo by Milbert G. Brown

Elaine Matsushita (left), the actual author of the Brillo-and-flatbread list, meets Hillary Carlip, creator of "Trish."

lip's book, and the two women giggle over the pages devoted to Estelle, whose list includes whole milk, heavy cream, ice cream, string cheese and "Gas-ex (!!!)" and who's also known by the affectionate nickname of Tootles.

Then, a thought occurs to Matsushita: "What if you pictured me ...?"

"... as an old man?" Carlip says, completing the sentence for her.

They laugh.

— Patrick T. Reardon

Organized at heart

By Elaine Matsushita
TRIBUNE REPORTER

The longer I look at the picture of the "Trish" that Hillary Carlip imagined from my shopping list, the more I feel as though I just took the "Which 'Sex and the City Character' Are You?" quiz and got Miranda. Instead of Carrie. Or Charlotte.

But that's taking Carlip's "a la Cart-ism" the wrong way. Her shtick, I figured out after coming face-to-face with the Queen of the Oddballs, is meant less to accurately channel the listmaker's persona, and more to let an audience enjoy the prancing of her imagination.

Carlip's spin with my grocery list conjured up an organized (more on this later), efficient (note the black organizer in the cart), busy professional (no, I don't really talk on my cell while waltzing the aisles of Dominick's) who likes to entertain (that I really do).

I guess my tiny (some say "neat") printing belies my penchant for tardy-ism, dirty dishes left in my sink, bollixed travel plans.

To Carlip, those little letters — that reminded me to pick up Brillo and granola; the words grouped keeping the breakfast foods together; then the ingredients for a roasted salmon dish — said "organized."

Ha ha! Ha?

Actually, world, Carlip was a little spot-on. What she saw in my list was the inner organized me. The one who gets locked away most days to make room for the one who works, tends a house, pays the bills, picks up after the as-of-yet-untrainable pup and tries to let the love shine through the rearing of two teenage boys.

But, yes, Carlip saw her. Yes, if I had all the time in the world, I would be organized. I am organized at heart. Or at least "in list."