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A PICTURE AND A THOUSAND WORDS

Fixated on grocery lists, a writer uses her scrap-paper evidence to construct imaginary lives for real-life strangers — then assumes their fictional identities

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SPECIAL TO THE STAR

Please meet Vera Misner, who is seen here standing in a supermarket somewhere in Beverly Hills, clutching a grocery list that reads, in part:

- sour cream
 - vermouth
 - sponges
 - paper towels
 - Binaca
- As for Vera herself, well, if you had to distill her complex essence into a character sketch, it might look something like this:
- Feng Shui obsessive
 - recently divorced from Stan, her husband of 34 years
 - Judith Krantz reader
 - martini drinker
 - reluctant to start dating again

But before you feel too sorry for poor Vera, I should probably tell you that she doesn't exist. Instead, please meet Hillary Carlip, a prankster, celebrity obsessive, and *Gong Show* winner (juggling and fire eating), whose strange exploits are detailed in her self-explanatory 2006 memoir *Queen of the Oddballs*.

Vera is one of the 26 characters featured in Carlip's brand new book, *À la Cart: The Secret Lives of Grocery Shoppers*. Although the people in *À la Cart* are fake, the found grocery lists Carlip used as raw material to create them are very real.

Carlip has been collecting the discarded supermarket lists of others since she was a teenager, starting with a list left behind in a cart in a Safeway in Westwood, Calif. She eventually decided to transform herself, with the help of a pair of make-up and hair experts, into the people she imagined belonged to these lists.

Although *À la Cart* suggests that we are what we buy, it seems that brevity is the soul of wit, even when it comes to a grocery run. Woody's list (written on the inside of a matchbook) reads, in its entirety, "coors, oreos."

Woody sports a Fu-Manchu and clutches a 24-ounce tin of said beer, a lit cigarette in his other hand. Tucked under his beer arm are, of course, a large package of those magical black and white cookies.

Each photograph includes a short biography, courtesy of Carlip. In Woody's case, his bio takes the form of an online dating profile from eHarmony, which mentions, "Today I am ready to meet just one Special Lady with NO KIDS and try to make something work. I'm hard working and have NO BANKRUPTCIES."

Like a dime-store detective with a minor in performance art, Carlip interrogates her scrap-paper evidence, studying handwriting, pen



BARBARA GREEN PHOTO

versus pencil, even the type of paper, to develop psychographic profiles of strangers.

Since Vera's list also includes vodka — and given that the list is written on a notepad that says "When the going gets tough, the tough go shopping" — Carlip decided that Vera was a jilted wife trying to ease her pain through mundane retail therapy and a steady diet of dry martinis and airport fiction.

Others in the book include roughneck Kim (whose list contains the

misspelled mantra "liqor, liqor, li-qor, liqor"), goth-boy Derrick (a gnomish combination of "mouse traps, cheese, mouse"), and ex-prince Pammy (Pescia, Nair, Listerine Strips, Gummy Bears and Vaseline).

This less-is-more approach to self is reminiscent of *Not Quite What I Was Planning*, a recent collection of six-word biographies assembled by Larry Smith and Rachel Fershtleiser. (Wikipedia founder Jimmy Wales' entry, for example, is: "Yes, you

can edit this biography.") *Not Quite* compresses a lifetime into a half-dozen words; Carlip offers biographies in 12 items or less.

Carlip is not the first, nor the only, person to find poetry in itemization. In *Milk Eggs Vodka: Grocery Lists Lost and Found*, author Bill Keagy curates an extensive collection of 300 lists into categories, including nutritional content and speed.

Sasha Cagen, meanwhile, last year published *To-Do List: From Buying*

Milk to Finding a Soul Mate, What Our Lists Reveal About Us.

Life lists continue to grow in popularity, as detailed by Alex Williams in *The New York Times* Sunday Styles section last August. As Williams writes, these "lists are results-oriented, quantifiable and relentlessly upbeat. If Aristotle were alive, he might envy the efficiency of a master list in which the messy search for meaning in life is boiled down to a simple grocery list..."

Finally, and for no other reason than it defies the imagination, my list about lists concludes with John Hodgman's *The Areas of My Expertise*, a book of fake knowledge that includes a tally of 800 hobo names. (It should be noted that the hardcover edition included a mere 700 names, a taxonomic oversight that was rectified with the paperback release.)

The list, then, not only functions as an external memory device but serves a social and cultural purpose. Rob Fleming, the protagonist of Nick Hornby's *High Fidelity*, uses lists to express himself emotionally. Magazine covers now boast of 953 hot looks for summer and 782 makeover tricks.

Joshua Kendall argues in the recent book *The Man Who Made Lists*, that Peter Mark Roget, better known as the thesaurus guy, became obsessed with lists of words as a way to impose order and clarity on his emotionally tumultuous existence and stave off bouts of anxiety.

"Which is to suggest that a grocery list might not only help you remember to buy avocados and sherry vinegar (that would be Vera again) but also save your life.

If you want to get technical, this essay started as a rough outline, which is basically a list of facts and ideas to discuss in a particular order. Which reminds me — we should take a last look at Vera, pensively staring into the middle distance of the aisle, before I run out of space.

Vera may no longer have Stan in her life (she caught him rearranging Tracii, a 20-something Feng Shui expert), but she still has her health — provided she takes it easy on the vermouth.

While customer-loyalty programs aggregate our data to understand exactly how we empty our wallets, Carlip prefers a more mystical approach.

As she writes in the introduction, "I've been tempted to snatch lists right out of shoppers' hands — especially the woman at Whole Foods who was buying soy milk as she was breast-feeding her baby. But then it would lack the mystery, the pleasure of getting to know these strangers, sight unseen, through their abandoned lists."