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## Milk eggs cheese bread collection

Wyandotte woman finds humor and sadness in other people's discarded shopping lists

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*Reader comments: "I loved the article about shopping lists. It always intrigues me when I see someone else's, and there have been many times when I'm jotting down quick notes to myself that I will start over if I have misspelled a word for fear someone will find it, turn it into the spelling police and it will be recorded on my permanent record." -- Ann McKenna, Ray.*

At her pine kitchen table, where a home-baked apple pie sits beneath a glass dome, Jane Scarlett opens her fat manila folder of other peoples' shopping lists and tries to explain herself.

"The first one - and I can't even remember which one it was - I picked up without any intention of picking up any more. I remember thinking, 'I'll be damned! Somebody wrote this and never thought anybody else would see it.' "

She saved it, as if it meant something, as if it were a lost ring someone would want back someday.

After saving one, she started seeing others. Chic, milk, bread. Crumpled at the bottom of shopping carts. Green tea (underlined), ho-ho cakes. Flattened, with tire marks, in parking lots. She picked them up. She read every one. She tucked each into her purse then, at home, into the folder on the bottom shelf of her bedroom bookcase.

Her teenage kids thought she was a little nutso. "Nobody cares, Mom!" they'd shriek when she tried to show a recent find to their friends.

She backed off. That was OK. She wasn't sure what had gotten into her either.

But then the kids, who worked at Jerry's, the local market in Wyandotte, began picking up lists, too, carrying them home to Mom like random wildflowers in a bouquet.

As of this week, Jane has 325 discarded grocery lists, about five years' worth. She's not compulsive. Sometimes she forgets to look. But one Sunday, a few days after her oldest

child left for college, missing him madly, she drove to Meijer in Southgate to look for lists in its vast parking lot.

"It was something to do," she shrugs. "To distract me."

She struggles to explain the fascination of the lists. "So many things we do as humans are like that, done so privately, in our own little containers: sleeping, dreaming, waking up in the middle of the night ... making a grocery list."

The lists give her a glimpse inside those private lives, "a glimpse of who they are, without me ever knowing who they are."

### **Blonia, no baloney**

She insists she is not a collector. "Oh no. That's not me at all." But there they are, a motley bundle of lists, or every shape, size and color.

That she saves strangers' lists seems consistent with who she is, a woman who picks up rocks and shells on vacations and brings them home in her luggage to her garden. She painted her bedroom floor pink. And the walls. In her paid work, she finds homes for the homeless. She knows all her neighbors - the artist, the war bride, the guy who cuts his grass at odd hours - and after dinner parties delivers to them the leftovers.

She calls clerks Darlin.'

She wonders why things are the way they are.

And so in her lists she reads comedy and tragedy.

And plenty of misspellings. Among her favorites: karut, carrets, blonia, nuddles, broccllie.

Cute abbreviations and innocent mistakes appear, too: hambuns. Spaggie sauce. 6 potatoes for biking. 1/2 lb r. beast.

She's learned a couple things about human nature from reading and rereading the lists. For one thing, everybody likes ground beef. For another, anything is adequate for a list: flimsy napkins, never-used envelopes, paycheck stubs.

One guy forgot to detach his check from the stub on which he wrote his list. She mailed the check to him, but kept the list.

The lists vary as much as people do.

Some are short: film, bleach. "Why did someone need a reminder for that?"

Others are long. One is bland - no surprises - but typed, for God's sake, with items organized by supermarket section, then printed on a clean white 8 1/2 -by-11 sheet.

One includes 53 scribbled items, including pecans and light corn syrup. "For pecan pie," deduces Jane, who's a baker, too. "Now that's going to be an event!"

You can guess which lists were written by nuns or former nuns, or at least former Catholic schoolgirls. The penmanship is perfect. Some of the lists have items crossed off --"So organized!"-- which makes them harder to read.

### **Sadness and joy**

One list in her collection is annotated. In black ink someone wrote: 9 beans, pie, eggs, paprika. In blue ink someone else noted next to pie: make it apple or coconut cream. At the end of the list he or she added Lots o' booze!! And at the very bottom: 9 beans won't feed 20 people! That's not even a half per person."

Some lists strike her as profoundly sad. On a deep blue Post-It note: Cigs, cough drops, slimfast -choc vanil, toilet paper.

And another, which the day I visit is being shown off in a small shadowbox frame on her kitchen table: laundry, cleaning, stocking for legs, cottage cheese, milk, shower curtain or rubber sheet, pigs ears, carrots.

"That's not good," Jane says. "That one makes me feel bad. A rubber sheet is only for someone who pees in the bed."

Others reek of joy, like one Jane's daughter found during a family trip to the North Carolina shore. On a folded white paper plate: ice, beer, clams casino, butter, milk, American cheese, tomatoe, cleaning stuff, blueberry, OJ, bread, juice.

"How vacationy is that?" That one delights her.

## Listomania

Most are routine. "Sometimes I read a list and think, 'That's not a very good one.' But that's like picking up a rock or a seashell and saying it's not good. What nerve is that? They're all good, every one of them."

She wonders, though, what lists would look like from the parking lots of expensive supermarkets in Birmingham or Troy. She wonders if people make lists up there, and whether they eat as much ground beef.

I tell Jane that she's not the only one fascinated by strangers' scribbles. A guy from Ann Arbor named Davy Rothbart founded a movement and a magazine called Found ([www.foundmagazine.com](http://www.foundmagazine.com)), which deals with all kinds of notes and scraps. And I've read that a St. Louis photographer who has collected about 1,300 shopping lists from all over the country is publishing a book next year called "Milk Eggs Vodka: Grocery Lists Lost and Found."

I tell her surely my readers can help her fatten her folder and, you know, maybe compete to get a book out earlier. If 100,000 people each send one list --

"Oh no," Jane interrupts me. "Please no." She's shaking her head, with her eyes closed. "Then it would be something I didn't mean for it to be."

Whatever she means by that.

I love its mystery.

### To do list before 6!

- Turn in bottles
- Get insurance
- Cyphine gas
- Cash checks
- Get ready

- Lie to CB
- Borrow \$ from some1
- Bring sunglasses
- Look for dimes
- Find another friend
- Get directions
- Phone charger
- Bring curling iron