

The first strange thing Nadia pulled from her pocket was a piece of fudge. It was a perfectly ordinary piece of fudge. But Nadia hated fudge, and couldn't imagine how she'd come to be carrying it around. She remembered this in particular because it was a bright, cool autumn day and she'd dug into her jacket pocket instinctively, looking for change to leave in a busker's open violin case, and had come upon the piece of fudge instead. After staring at it awkwardly for a moment, she dropped it into the violin case and hurried away before she could see whether the busker was scowling at her or not.

She didn't think about the fudge again until a few days later, when, fumbling for her wallet at the grocery store, her hand closed on an unfamiliar tube of lipstick. It was unfamiliar in several respects: First, Nadia didn't keep lipstick in her jacket pocket; second, on inspection, it was a bright, light red that Nadia would never have chosen for herself, favouring plums and burgundies; and third, it just didn't *feel* like hers. Nadia knew her own things. She could pick out her non-descript, utterly generic black cloth suitcase from among the dozens piling up in airport luggage carousels purely by that feel of the familiar, that tug of touch, of knowing its contours, its frayed threads and worn wheels.

She'd never been anywhere with this lipstick. It was half-used, too; Nadia found herself imagining a complexion materializing around the mouth that had worn this colour—carnelian, she thought, in the absence of a brand name. She found herself leaning toward her reflection in a furniture store window, thinking to try it—but stopped, frowning, and capped the tube. She took it home, placed it in her bathroom, and found herself looking at it every morning while she brushed her teeth, wondering.

The third strange thing Nadia pulled from her pocket was an antique map of Syria. It was rolled up tightly, and her cold fingers strained clumsily against its curling edges. By now, she was certain someone was playing a trick on her, slipping things into her pockets when she wasn't paying attention. She decided she was willing to play along for a while. She took the map home, rolled up and secured with a bit of ribbon, and placed it on her desk. After a moment, she went into the bathroom, retrieved the lipstick, and put it down next to the map.

The fourth thing was a coin, old and worn; whatever face or figure had been stamped on it was long faded. Nadia found it in the pocket of her jeans while reaching for her door key. She put it next to the map, arranging and re-arranging the collection, sometimes standing the map up, sometimes laying it down with the lipstick in front of it, sometimes poking both lipstick and coin into the hollow cylinder it made.

She wondered if she ought to have kept the fudge.

Over the next few days Nadia looked for clues as to who was playing this game with her. She tried to drop casual hints around friends, who looked confused; when she tried

outright asking if they were putting things in her pockets, they looked amused, or offended. She stopped asking.

The objects, she felt, were becoming more esoteric. She pulled out what looked like a pin made of bone from the pocket of a cardigan; a stiff-bristle paintbrush from a flimsy decorative trouser pocket that should certainly have been too small for it; a single chopstick from an inside jacket pocket; an old-looking bath plug and chain from the pocket of her favourite dress (favourite, heretofore, because it had pockets). She arranged them all on her desk, making more and more space for them, feeling more and more helpless as the pile grew.

One evening, as she undressed, she found herself pulling a gun from her trousers—a flintlock pistol, its lobed stock of dark wood ornamented with chased brass mounts.

The gun smelled strongly of having just been fired.

She decided to stop wearing pockets.

Nadia walked along the river with her friend, only half-listening to Tessa while breathing on her thinly-gloved hands, rubbing them together in the cold air. She could see the moisture from her breath crystallizing on the gloves' loose fibres.

When Tessa asked, "Why don't you just put your hands in your pockets?" she winced.

"I can't," she muttered.

Tessa blinked. "What? Why not?"

"I—um. I sewed them shut."

"What!"

Nadia shrugged. "They were... Tearing. It's not usually a problem, I have tons of gloves, I just thought it'd be warmer today."

"They were tearing on the inside so you sewed them *shut*?"

"Can we not talk about this?" said Nadia, angrily. "It's winter, my hands are cold, whatever."

Tessa looked like she'd been slapped, and slowed her pace a bit. Nadia suddenly felt a stab of guilt, one that sank deep into her belly as she watched Tessa tug off her mittens—big, woolly things Nadia had knitted her a year ago—and hold them out to her quietly.

Nadia's eyes glistened. "I'm sorry. I just—I'm sorry," she said, taking the mittens and slipping them on. "Thank you."

“You’ve been so distracted lately,” said Tessa, quietly. “Just let me know if you want to talk about it, OK?”

Nadia said nothing for a long moment.

“If I tell you,” she said, looking her friend in the eye, “you have to promise to believe me.”

Tessa was a biologist-in-training. Nadia braced herself for the skepticism, the scrutiny, the razor of Tessa’s inquiring mind slicing through the half-formed thoughts Nadia had about what was happening.

But Tessa didn’t even hesitate. “I promise,” she said.

Nadia breathed deeply and exhaled slowly. Then, handing Tessa back her mittens, she pressed one hand against the side of her coat, and with the other began to break the stitches keeping the pocket shut.

Then she reached into her pocket and pulled out a trombone.

They spent the afternoon organizing tests in the biology department’s student labs: It warmed Nadia’s heart to see Tessa brimming with excitement, dressing her in one of Tessa’s university-issued lab coats while burbling about thermodynamics and conservation of mass.

“So,” she beamed, “if we weigh you with the lab coat pockets empty, and then you pull something out of your pocket and your weight equals Nadia-plus-Object, then we have to suppose the object was somehow taken from elsewhere.”

“Oh.” Nadia frowned. She didn’t like the thought that she was *taking* things from elsewhere—she didn’t want them, after all. She’d come to think of the objects as intrusions in her life, not something she’d removed from someone or someplace else.

“If, on the other hand,” Tessa continued, “you pull something out of your pocket and your weight doesn’t change, then the object must’ve somehow been deducted from your mass.”

“Wait, what?” Nadia stared. “You mean, like—I’d be *turning into* trombones and fudge and maps? That they’re made out of me?”

“No, no,” said Tessa, laughing, “don’t be silly, that’d be magic.”

“But then—”

“Just get on the scale, hon.”

Nadia did so, shuddering at the thought of shedding pieces of herself, one half-used tube of lipstick at a time.

“Are you still cold?” asked Tessa, sympathetically.

“No, I’m fine. Let’s do this.”

“Right, 70.534 kg—” Tessa made a note. “Now—pull something out.”

Nadia took a deep breath, closed her eyes, reached into the lab coat’s pocket and pulled out—

“OH, er, that’s mine,” said Tessa hastily, plucking the tampon out of Nadia’s hand.

“Crap, I’m always leaving stuff in there. Hand me the coat back, I’ll take care of it.”

Nadia waited while Tessa retrieved two pens, another tampon, and a pair of safety specs from the pockets before handing the coat back. She put it back on, waited for Tessa to note her weight again, then—slowly, carefully—reached into the lab coat.

She felt about with her fingers until they brushed against something round and bumpy. Biting her lip, she pulled out an orange studded with cloves, dry and fragrant.

“A pomander!” said Tess, delighted. “This is amazing. OK, let’s look at the scale—”

Nadia held her breath. She wondered if the weight of the soul could be reckoned in fruit and spice.

“—you, my dear, have put on the weight of one pomander.” Tessa grinned. “I think we can safely deduce that this is a spatio-temporal issue and not a weird skin condition.”

Together, they determined that Nadia could only pull things out of pockets she herself was wearing; that a coat draped over one shoulder apparently didn’t count as “wearing” after several separate tries; that objects did not vanish if put back in the pockets; and that after a pomander, an ocarina, an empty plastic bag, a dry peach pit, a drop spindle, a broken hockey stick, an empty fountain pen, a small gnome, and a pack of wooden playing cards, they were no closer to learning where the objects were coming from, why they had started appearing in Nadia’s pockets, or, most crucially, how to make them stop.

“Tessa,” she said, finally, “can we—stop trying to figure out how this is happening and try to figure out why it’s happening?”

“Huh?” Tessa blinked. “But we are doing that. I mean, the one will lead to the other eventually—but it’s like figuring out the weather. Some days it rains, or snows, or is sunny, right?”

“Sure.”

“And if we didn’t know about seasons—or climate change—or hot and cold fronts—the weather would seem pretty random, right?”

“Right.”

“So, think of this as a weather system of *stuff*. We’re trying to figure out why they’re coming out of your pockets; but until we find out how that’s happening, what the variables are, we can’t do much more than guesswork.”

“Tessa—” Nadia felt helpless. “That makes perfect sense, but—look, *stuff is coming out of my pockets*. I get that this has all kinds of really neat implications for, I don’t know, science, but—I just—I want to stop measuring things and think about it differently? Like, just take the weird thing as read? And go on from there?”

Tessa frowned. “How do you mean?”

“Well—” Nadia gestured to the accumulated objects, which, rather than being in a heap as she’d have put them, were neatly labeled and organized by size for further examination. “—I keep thinking—what if it’s a message? What if—however the stuff’s ending up in my pockets—what if it’s all part of a pattern and I’m just not seeing it? Or—what if it’s *me*? What if I woke up with this *power* one day and I’m supposed to be using it for good, to help people, but I can’t because I’ve not figured it out? I just—” the frustration made her throat ache. “I found a *gun* in my pocket, Tessa! That has to mean something, doesn’t it?”

Tessa grew quiet. “Okay. I’m sorry—it must be weird to just have me treating you as a problem to be solved. Tell me what you’d like to do and I’ll listen.”

Nadia thought for a moment. Then she closed her eyes again and pulled out a rectangular cardboard box the length of her forearm. There was a label on the front: “Full Scale, S 6032, Au Clair de la Lune, Op. 50, Variations et final., *Lambert*, ACCENTUATED.” Frowning, she lifted the lid.

“It’s a pianola roll,” said Tessa, standing on tip-toe to see into the box. “I’ve seen Warda stacking them in the music department.”

“...Could we...” She looked around the lab, not very hopeful of finding a player piano. “Could we go there? Maybe see if we can play this?”

Tessa chewed her lip, but nodded. “Sure.”

Warda had been the university’s College Support Librarian for Music for twenty-six years. She spoke English, Arabic, German, French, Swedish, and Russian. She played the piano and three kinds of flute. She had lived in four countries and fled two before settling.

Tessa knew her from flute lessons; Nadia knew her from the occasional question or conversation about music history. Neither could imagine the library without her in it.

Warda looked at the pianola roll curiously. “We can certainly play it—it’s in good condition. But may I ask why? It’s a common tune.”

Nadia and Tessa exchanged a look.

“It’s... An experiment,” said Tessa, slowly. Nadia looked at Warda, thoughtfully.

“I... Found it in a pocket,” she said, quietly, and saw something in Warda’s expression of mild curiosity shift and tense. “I don’t know where it came from.”

“I see,” said Warda. “May I?”

Nadia held out the roll to her. Warda took it with one hand, and with the other, held open the tiny knitted pocket of her cardigan.

They watched as all twelve inches of the pianola roll vanished into the pocket without making so much as a bulge in the fabric.

Warda poured tea for them in her office while Tessa asked question after question.

“When did this start?”

“Oh, a year or so ago, give or take.”

“And did you ever lose any of these things?” Tessa showed her a list of things that had come out of Nadia’s pockets, but Warda smiled and shook her head.

“No. None of those ever belonged to me; I do not think any of the things I have put in my pockets have come out of Nadia’s. I see why you’re asking, but I don’t think it works that way.”

“Why not?” asked Nadia.

“I suppose it just doesn’t make sense to me that in all the world ours would be the only two pockets connected to each other. Have you read Stoppard’s *Arcadia*? ‘We shed as we pick up, like travellers who must carry everything in their arms, and what we let fall will be picked up by those behind.’ There are so many of us, so many travellers.”

“Thermodynamics,” murmured Tessa.

“If you like,” said Warda, stirring sugar into her tea. “I think of it as leaks—leaks in the universe, and things that plug up those leaks. If one thing vanishes, another has to appear.”

“But you don’t *know* that,” said Nadia, uncertainly.

“No. I just know that I carry my keys and wallet in a purse and thank goodness for the paucity of pockets in women’s clothing.” She smiled, and Tessa chuckled, but Nadia said nothing.

Warda offered her a mug of tea, gently. “Shall I tell you more of how I think of it?”

Nadia nodded, accepting the mug, spreading her fingers around it and through its ear to absorb as much of its heat as she could.

“I had always wanted to write,” said Warda, “When I was a child—words, music. But it was not convenient. When this started happening, I began to write: Small things, notes, letters. I wrote ‘hello’ in different languages; I wrote my email address; I wrote little rhymes. I would roll them up and put them in my pocket and hope that someone would receive them, read them, and want to find me.” She chuckled into her tea. “It was a very romantic thought.

“But then I thought, no, it was not about me, ultimately—or it was, but not as I’d imagined. I thought, if there is a leak in my pocket, perhaps someone else’s pocket is the opposite. And I thought, perhaps when I write, when I create something out of the nothing—the everything, really—that is because somewhere else, someone else has a need. A leak. A hole in the pocket of their soul. And while I cannot be sure, perhaps my words are what will fill them up. So I have written longer things—letters, stories, songs—whatever I feel moved to write, even if it is poor, shabby stuff. I put my writing in my pockets, and I hope for the best.”

“But you never know,” said Nadia, again, with an urgency. “There’s no way to *know*. What if I’m stealing things from other places without meaning to? What if I’m supposed to use these things somehow, for something important? How—” she exhaled, loudly, frustrated. “—how can I know what it *means*?”

“Well,” said Warda, sipping her tea, “it has been a year and I have learned this very interesting thing: That I was right about someone else having the equal and opposite sort of pocket. Thanks to you, I know this.” Warda smiled, put her hand on Nadia’s arm. “And we can only do our best with what we know.”

Tessa helped Nadia carry all the things that had come out of her pockets to Warda. They divided them up into things they wanted to keep and things they wanted to pass along. Tessa claimed the pomander; Nadia, after a moment’s thought, kept the lipstick; Warda, biting her lip, took the map of Syria. After that—beginning with the gun, which Nadia still couldn’t quite bring herself to look at—they took turns slipping each item into the tiny, decorative, insufficient pocket of Warda’s cardigan, and watched as each was swallowed in turn by its fine green knit.

Tessa hugged Nadia as they parted outside the library. Looking at her carefully, she said “do you want to borrow my mittens?”

“No thanks,” said Nadia, smiling a little. “I think I’ll be okay.” And as if to prove her point, she slid her hands into the pockets of her coat.

Once Tessa left, Nadia took a deep breath, closed her eyes, and closed her hand around something. It crinkled in her hand; she pulled out a piece of lined paper with writing on it in blue ink. Smoothing it down as best she could with her thinly gloved hands, she began to read.

She read,

*I don't know you, but I wish I did; I wish I could tell you how much I love you, love your eyes for reading this, love your hands for holding my words. I wish I could tell you in a way you would understand that so long as you read this, the world is not so terrible a place; that so long as we speak to each other, so long as there is love in the movement of a pen over paper and love in the movement of eyes over words, we will be all right, we will know each other, we will learn each other like songs.*

*Know nothing else of me but that I love you, that I love you as one can only love the unknown conjured by address, that as I speak to you I am inventing you and that as you read me you are inventing me, and that this is keenly, unspeakably beautiful. Know that whatever else you may be, you are beloved, completely, unconditionally, by me in this space, in this moment, and that this space and this moment will endure ever and always for as long as you read this.*

*I wrote this for you, for only you, for you alone out of the millions.*

*I love you. Thank you.*