

# Pockets

By Elizabeth Newman

The snowflakes swirled and danced around Natalie in a thick, white freefall. She lifted her face, squinting into the kamikaze flakes as they collided with her bare skin leaving touches of light, downy fluff that zinged before warming to cool, damp spots. Carefully picking her footing she made her way down the virgin snow-covered sidewalk. The accumulating snow had covered the slightly tarnished neighborhood street, making everything appear as though it were wearing a simple, clean, white veil.

Ahead of her, through the curtain of falling snow, Natalie saw one other lone figure out braving the early morning elements a woman dressed in a long, white coat. In her hand she held a shockingly red shopping bag that swayed back and forth against the chaotic, white backdrop of falling snow. For some reason that Natalie couldn't quite put her finger on, it made her feel uneasy to trudge some distance behind in the woman's disappearing tracks.

Natalie soon came upon the small antique shop that she had visited the day before while Christmas shopping. She quickened her pace ever so slightly as she pulled her mitten off and dug deep into her pocket searching for the tiny, jade, Buddha figurine she'd impulsively taken "at a five-finger discount" from the shop. She ran her bare thumb over the beautifully hand-carved, smoothly polished jade and felt no pleasure. Instead she instantly felt her heart slip a guilty notch, catching on regret and sad frustration at having taken it.

As she passed the antique shop's inviting front door she remembered its festive jingle of bells and how she had hoped to find a few Christmas gifts there yesterday. What she had found instead was a smartly dressed shop attendant, all tailored tall and thin, sitting behind a massive, heavily carved desk and talking on a vintage telephone. Natalie couldn't help overhearing him as he whined to someone about the appalling lack of an affluent clientele and why something would never work in this mixed-bag neighborhood. As if to prove his point, he sadly gave Natalie's old, worn coat a quick once-over and immediately dismissed rather than greeted her. What a pompous ass! she thought, stinging from his blatant slight. She could feel the old, familiar bitterness of intimidation rise in her throat as her courage slipped into a dark corner, and she hesitated for just a step before moving past him toward a vanity table smothered under a display of mirrors.

Natalie moved through the shop, occasionally picking up a piece to check its price tag before carefully returning it to its place. Her heart sank as she realized that the few items she liked were beyond her meager means to purchase. Wishing she'd never come in, she pushed herself forward quickly on her return loop of the shop. Her stomach clenched as she approached the shop attendant, still making noises into his vintage telephone about the declining neighborhood. She hurried toward the door, but then slowed when she was drawn to a display of religious icons sitting on an open shelf.

As Natalie lingered over the figurines, the shop door opened with another jingle of bells, ushering in a customer whose stylish coat earned her a wet, toothy greeting from the shop attendant as he replaced the receiver without saying goodbye. With a graceful flourish he slithered out from behind the enormous desk to chat with the extravagantly coiffed woman. Natalie listened intently as their eloquent words in softly spoken tones laced together the four walls of the tiny shop and tightened them around her. Her nostrils flared as she instinctually took a deep breath inhaling the rich, oiled scent of polished antiques and expensive perfume. Casting a vindictive, sideways glance at the two of them, she reached out and felt her fingers aching slip around what she wanted from the shelf of icons. I'll fix them, she thought bitterly as she tucked the tiny, jade Buddha into the well of her coat pocket.

Natalie was headed for the door again when she heard a noise

behind her. Startled she turned to see a dark figure standing at the back of the shop, blending into the background of browns and grays. He stared at her with a leering grin that made the fine hairs on the nape of her neck stand on end. With a sharp exhale of breath she picked up her pace again, brushing past the smug shop attendant now mewling and groveling before the obviously wealthy woman. Serves them right, she thought as she reached the front of the store, her new buddies Triumph and Elation whispering giddy promises of satisfaction every step of the way. Once outside, however, Satisfaction never did join the party. Instead Natalie found herself arm-in-arm with Guilt and Anger. When she stole a glance back over her shoulder she saw the creepy, dark man who had been at the back of the antique shop now standing outside, watching her. She sucked in a breath of cold air and held it as she felt Shame close in on her heels and wash over her. She swiped at a snowflake that had landed on her eyelashes and then bent her head to the wind and shuffled past the antique shop wishing she could forget the whole incident.

When Natalie looked up to get her bearings, she saw that the woman in white had stopped some distance ahead on the street corner. Natalie watched as she stood on the curb, the red shopping bag swinging at her side as she looked right, then left. As she stepped out into the street, Natalie saw something small drop from the red shopping bag and fall into the snow. She slipped a little as she called out, "Excuse me! You dropped something!" It took Natalie a few seconds more to reach the street corner before calling out again, but by then the woman in white had disappeared behind the cascading curtain of snow.

Natalie teetered on the curb, looking down at a small, red, heart-shaped box that stood out like a beacon in the shrouded world of white. She tightened her grip around the tiny, jade Buddha in her pocket before stepping out into the street to retrieve the small, red box from the drifting snow. Leaving the tiny, jade Buddha in her pocket, she reached for the small, red box just as a car careened through the wall of falling snow and slid straight toward her. She felt her feet slip out from under her as she scrambled to get out of the way and went down on her knees. The next thing she knew she was looking up at the grill of a black Subaru.

Dazed and still on her knees in the street, she heard the car door open, then slam shut. The driver of the car slipped and slid as fast as he could around the hood of the Subaru and reached down to help her up. In a panicky voice, he asked, "Are you all right, lady?"

"Wow, umm, I think so," Natalie said, struggling to get to her feet. "I didn't really get hit, I mean, I slipped trying to get out of the way," she said, letting the man help her up by her elbow. Once she was steady on her feet, he stepped back a little. Natalie began brushing the snow from her coat with one hand while holding the small, red box in the other.

"Jeez, you scared the daylights out of me. Are you sure you're okay? You didn't get hit? You're sure?" he asked, again extending a hand to touch her shoulder. "My name's Malachi, Malachi Kaplan."

"I'm Natalie, Natalie Hatch," she said, looking up into his kind, concerned eyes. "We'd better get out of the street before someone else comes along."

"Okay, yeah, yeah, okay. Jeez, you really gave me a scare," Malachi said. "You're sure you're okay?"

"I'm sure. I didn't get hit. I'm really okay, just shook up a little," Natalie assured him, then added, "That really was close, wasn't it?"

"Yes, very close," he said, lifting his eyebrows and tucking his chin. "I'm awfully glad you're all right. Can I give you a ride?"

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