

Reclaiming Roots

MARCH 13, 2020: GRAFENWOERH, GERMANY

For breakfast, I steam broccoli, add two egg whites and a handful of peanuts. I eat this alongside a bright, puckery lemon. Coffee steams in a white cup as I obsessively refresh the news, looking for something ... new. Vegetables for breakfast isn't too off-center for me, but I'm aware, while eating the broccoli, that it might be the last I have for a while.

I'm an American stuck in Germany because of a Department of Defense Stop Movement order, issued on March 12 by Secretary of Defense Mark Esper. Mid-morning, I received a call that due to the classification of Germany as a Category 3 country, my move would be delayed indefinitely. I was ten days away from moving out of Germany and onto a new duty station in America. To prepare for the move, my house has been empty since the second week of February. I've let every single item in my refrigerator and freezer slowly dwindle, exercising every creative culinary tip I've ever developed to create meals that used strange ingredients and were appealing. With bare cupboards and a freezer that only housed two sets of ice cube trays, learning I'm going to be stuck in Germany for the foreseeable future has resurfaced a fear I thought long gone.

I grew up below the poverty line; food is something I subconsciously hoard. Meals growing up utilized anything that was on sale, and my mother's deft and clever recipes meant we never knew the difference. She taught me the benefit of a cellar with onions and potatoes; who cares if they grow eyes or shoots? I know that I need cans of beans and bags of rice, frozen juice, shelf-stable sardines, and packets of tuna. Green jars of premade pickles, packets of yeast and bags of flour, vinegars for fermenting and making sauces, fresh herbs to string upside down and dry for seasonings and sauces.

After I finish my cruciferous breakfast, I make a list, starting with what I want to eat and working backward, a recipe in reverse. I see my mother sitting at our plywood-laminate table doing the same, her careful handwriting indenting the paper with food wishes. My own is scratchy and hurried.

German supermarkets are off-limits, and the commissary cut its early-bird hours, so the only time any of us have access to food on the weekend is between eleven in the morning and five in the evening. I slurp my coffee, one eye on the page, one eye on the news. There's a headache fear building somewhere deep, a kind of worry I thought I'd earned enough money to usurp.

I have to get out on time to drive thirty minutes to reach the installation to go through the pre-screening check to go through the identification card check to drive to the commissary to park my car to wait in line to wash my hands to wait in line to get a paper towel to wait in line to get a cart to wait in line to go inside. I have to get there faster than everyone else so I can get in line sooner so I can get to the food. These sprinting thoughts bounce around my brain; nothing moves quickly enough.

I wash my hands with water, imagining it came from a fresh spring somewhere in the Alps. The portable sink reminds me of a dental office. A uniformed Specialist wearing blue latex gloves and a white mask hands me a paper towel and then tells me to use hand sanitizer. Instructions on social distancing, cart hygiene, and shopping limits are reviewed. There's panic in my throat now. I want a call and response instead of this rote performance. This feels too staged, too remote, too real.

The wind bites, stark gusts that cut through me. To stay warm, I repeat my list over and over, the items I need become a mantra of self-reliance. The line begins at a snail's pace toward the door. Wives and husbands and small children all trying to keep the panic from their faces. My hands are numb and red, and my nose is running. I cough as quietly as possible, not because I'm sick but because worry and fear taste like acid in my throat, making me feel choked.

There is no beef, there is no chicken, and the supply of eggs shipped in from Denmark is very low. Holes on the shelves remind me of extracted teeth, their gaping uselessness a placeholder for what should be there. As a remote military

community, we are accustomed to food being out of stock. This is standard for us, and in “normal” times it takes two weeks for the products to return. Seeing the hollow spaces makes me walk the aisles faster.

I head for the frozen section but those deep freezer shelves are empty, too. Entire cultivars of beans are missing, as are several varieties of red sauce for pasta. There’s no quinoa or bagged rice. Lentils have been missing since this began. Pasta pickings are slim. There’s no yogurt, no feta, a few sticks of forlorn butter. My mother taught me cooking is an art and baking is a science. I remind myself of that cruising the aisles, reconfiguring my list as I go.

I pile my basket with all the vegetables I can find, less than picky with my selections. I pluck ripe bananas and in-season fruits and deposit them in my cart. Celery that needs a little love, zucchini with pockmarks, eggplant ready to go soft. Bags of carrots, earth crested into their crevices. Bags of green, condensation making them flat. Ginger and garlic, tomatoes for roasting and peppers for heat. My basket becomes a garden recreated, freshness that’s ready to be frozen, stored, safe-guarded.

Two boxes of freezer-safe bags, a roll of parchment paper, two canisters of oats. I distill what I thought I needed into the simplest, most basic way to make art. To make life. To continue to live. 