

Junk Food Solidarity

MARCH 16, 2020: ARUSHA, TANZANIA

I was standing in Arusha's largest supermarket when the first Tanzanian case of COVID-19 was announced.

Even before my phone buzzed with the message, I knew. I saw employees rush to their supervisor with open palms like preschoolers lining up for treats. Only they were receiving hand sanitizer, not candies.

I knew this meant COVID-19 was here, at home.

Home for me is Arusha, Tanzania. This beautiful green East African country has been my home for five years. The fertile soil means an abundance of food and the tropical weather ensures a year-round supply of fruit and vegetables. The majority of the population does not buy produce at supermarkets.

Local markets, with piles of tomatoes and bunches of bananas and pushing bodies and shouting sellers, are where we buy vegetables and fruits. Local produce markets are unique shopping experiences, laden with conversations and jokes I don't usually have with a supermarket cashier. I may insult the look of a seller's bruised fruit, but in the end we will both be laughing. I have a go-to pineapple boy who will scold me if I purchase pineapple from any of his neighbors. A friend who asks about my children as she inspects each individual egg before carefully wrapping a dozen in old newspaper.

I have grown to love shopping at the crowded, loud market because of the camaraderie. I leave the market with full baskets and a genuine smile after greeting friends.

The supermarket, on the other hand, is a place for the frivolous. It is where I buy chocolates and cookies, ice cream and cheese.

Cheese is mostly an imported product and not part of the regular Tanzanian diet. Locally made cheeses are starting to appear, but the hefty prices prove they are a luxury item. I usually eat cheese sparingly; mozzarella on pizza or pasta, a special grilled-cheese sandwich for lunch. The sandwich is not made with the best cheddar I've ever tasted, but it is lovingly prepared and deeply savored. It is also the best I can get in Arusha.

There I was, standing next to a shelf of chickpeas (20% off) when the employees lined up for squirts of hand sanitizer. My mind immediately started rolling through what items we would need at home. Like all other customers in the store, some invisible force pulled me toward the cleaning aisle, where I paused beside a rack of mops. Besides some toothpaste and toothbrushes, I couldn't think of a single thing we lacked. I buy in bulk already and five liters of hand soap is going to last us a long time, social distancing or not.

Beyond cleaning supplies, our day-to-day needs are very simple and local. Not only local to our town but also to our immediate neighborhood. We purchase fresh cow's milk from our neighbor, and I save up the cream for homemade butter. We have our own small vegetable garden and several banana trees with new bunches ripening all the time. We recently planted corn and beans in the field, and have a stock of forty kilos of rice that will hold us for a long time.

Tanzania in general is mostly self-sufficient: many communities have a small mill to grind flour and our neighborhood has an oil press for sunflower seeds. We could easily buy all our produce from our neighbors without traveling into Arusha town.

I might miss some luxuries, but we would be quite comfortable without them.

I walked through the cleaning aisle without adding anything to my basket.

Then, I came upon the treats—chips and cookies, marshmallows and packages of toffee. Perhaps there is comfort in having more than just healthy necessities. Splurges as a defense against the stress of uncertainty.

So, I decided to add some extra luxuries for us all, wafers and snack mixes for the kids. Then I headed to the deli section and plopped a full kilogram of cheddar cheese into the cart. I felt a bit embarrassed—what a thing to buy at a time like this! But then I shook off the feeling and added a second kilo of cheese.

I felt very silly as I headed to the cashier with toothpaste, toothbrushes, snacks, and lots and lots of cheese.

All the checkout lines were full: a cart with three jugs of bleach, the next with stacks of bottled water.

It seemed as though everyone else was buying the practical essentials and cleaning items. Everyone except one elderly gentleman. I chose to stand in line behind him precisely because he was purchasing five liters of strawberry ice cream.

We smiled to one another, he nodding toward my cheese and I commending his ice cream.

Then, a woman joined the line behind me. She had no cart or basket, but clutched two enormous bags of chocolates to her chest. They were her only purchase.

I told her she had her priorities straight, feeling much better about my cheese.

All around us, others were buying toilet paper and ten-pack boxes of hand sanitizer. I looked ahead at the too-pink ice cream and behind at the milk chocolate hearts.

For some reason, our little line of junk-food purchasers remained small, while the carts of bleach and disinfectant piled up on either side of us.

Everyone prepares for a pandemic differently. Some feel comfort in enough cleaning supplies and toilet paper to last through the end of the year; I found solace in having more than enough cheese for the next month. Based on the purchases of my neighbors, we felt a solidarity in our shared excesses of ice cream, cheese and chocolate. Solidarity over junk food. 