

# Here, with a Handbasket

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It was supposed to be a work trip: fly up to New York City for a week's worth of filming and tack on an appointment with my oncologist before flying home. Ten days. But now I'm standing in the narrow aisle of Morton Williams grocery, clutching an empty handbasket with a sanitizing wipe carefully positioned to keep the palm of my hand from touching the flimsy black handle, trying to figure out exactly what to buy for the next two weeks, maybe months, when I currently have, quite literally, nothing in the unit where I'm temporarily residing.

It's equipped with the type of bare-bones amenities you'd expect of apartments primarily used for short business trips in the city. There are a few mismatched pieces of silverware; an abused and neglected skillet; and a diminishing stack of red Solo cups in the cabinet. No one is expected to cook on their *per diem*, not with Manhattan's restaurant scene at their fingertips. But the city is closing down, and closing in, quickly.

I head to the pasta aisle, as has, it seems, everyone else. In the early days of a pandemic, it's good to have a predilection for the lesser-appreciated grains. Not a box of spaghetti to be found, but plenty of orzo and farro still on the shelves. I get a pound apiece and set about gathering up the rest of the ingredients I need to make my favorite dishes with each: lemons, red wine vinegar, the very last container of sour cream (more versatile than *crème fraîche*), olive oil, feta, beefsteak tomatoes, a cucumber, and container of kale.

I recall seeing one of those disposable salt shakers on the kitchen counter but don't trust it to be full; I add a carton of salt and, while I'm at it, a five-pound bag of sugar to the basket. The sugar reminds me of tea and tea requires half-and-half so I head to the dairy section. *Ah, butter. That's a staple.* I get a pound of butter and look around. *Yogurt, yes, I need yogurt.* I feel momentary joy at seeing my favorite brand, so grab two thirty-two-ounce containers of Brown Cow cream-top plain. I get a box of cereal too, just in case.

The basket is starting to strain under the weight, but I feel accomplished. A couple of pantry basics, some grains, some fresh produce. Three canvas bags fully packed.

But away from the fluorescent lights and crammed shelves of the supermarket, the omissions become quite glaring. No sweets. No snacks. No use for the butter. Nothing to drink but tap water and tea.

I make a list of a few other items to pick up:

- Junk food
- Bread
- Fruit
- Milk
- Chicken (?)

The next day, Monday, I learn that my studio work has been cancelled. A few hours earlier I'd been on the phone with Columbia Irving advocating for myself once again, this time pushing back against having my lymph node biopsy rescheduled as a tele-health call. Successful for the time being, but now in a strange limbo: positioned in the epicenter of a global health crisis because the expertise I'm relying on for my non-COVID health needs is here. Do I go home? My appointment is still on; if I miss it, rescheduling might delay treatment. What if I can't get back? What if staying in NYC puts me at greater risk? What if traveling through the airports does? What if, what if.

I walk uptown to a larger, fancier supermarket to round out my pandemic pantry with processed sundries. The shelves of bagged salad blends are empty, but there are plenty of avocados and pears. I grab a fresh baguette from a bakery rack and pick up a couple of Cornish hens.

It's in the snack aisle that the anxiety really hits. Snacking is, by nature, impulsive. What am I going to crave tomorrow? Next week? As I wander up and down the aisles, noting what has been picked clean—peanut butter, soup stock, and most canned beans—and hasn't—dried chickpeas, almond butter—a bag of Craze Extra Thin & Crunchy Guava flavored toasted corn

crisps catches my eye. I have no idea what these are, but I like guava; surely I should buy them. A newness to look forward to when confined to the same walls day in, day out. The bag features an image of an orange-pink cracker-type wafer topped with what I assume is a spreadable, white cheese. *A soft cheese would also work with the baguette.*

I've been in the store a good twenty minutes by now, and it's only when I head to the cheese counter in search of triple-cream brie that I encounter the line, snaking its way around the perimeter. There are probably a hundred people waiting, elbow distance apart. An utter failure in social distancing. I consider dropping my handbasket and leaving, but figure I've already been exposed. Still, there's a sudden urgency to expedite the trip.

I spot a jar of imported clotted cream—a treat I don't typically justify. In the cart it goes. There's a large display of Castelvetrano olives (another favorite), but these, for whatever reason, I pass up. So do most people, I'm hearing. Americans don't buy olives for the apocalypse.

I consider buying chocolate bars, but it feels immature to buy candy at a time like this, as if the current contents of my basket—which now include a few cans of lychee rose-flavored seltzer water (the glass bottle of my go-to elderflower lemonade mixer felt too heavy) and a bottle of sesame oil—suggest more sagacious decision-making.

I stand in line for another half hour. The two early twenty-somethings in front of me have a cart packed with frozen pizza, pasta and pasta sauce, and orange juice. "I'm going to get these," he tells his friend, grabbing another handful of frozen meals, "because this way, even if we don't want to cook, we can still eat." The late-thirties couple behind me passes the time by evaluating every adjacent item. "What's this? Oh it's like a cake made only out of figs. Are those walnuts? Do we need this? A fig cake with walnuts?" *Nobody needs a fig bread*, I think, as I kick my basket of things nobody needs closer toward the checkout.

When the order to shelter-in-place appears imminent, the thought of locking down with this barren kitchen filled with a motley array of misfit ingredients feels nearly as daunting as the virus itself. My appointment is still eight days away. I call a close friend; we agree it's best I stay with him and his son.

The labors of my anxiety-driven grocery runs mingle in his pantry of beans and rice, soups, and wine. There's bread and ice cream; dish soap and mixing bowls. Baking soda and flour. Spices and condiments. All the little things that suddenly feel luxurious in the face of austerity.

He offers me a cup of tea and a madeleine.

"These little processed madeleines were the only bread left on the shelf. They might be a little dry."

Preparing for disaster, dipping sponge cake into tea, we wait for it to crumble apart. 🍷