

# I Miss the Grocery Store the Most

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I miss the manager at Safeway the most. A statuesque trans woman who treats me like a confidant whenever I'm in, hugging me and giving me hairstyling tips.

I miss the head of the seafood department at Fred Meyer the most. I don't think we ever introduced ourselves, but she treats me like a daughter whenever I'm in, coming from around the counter to tell me what to buy this week, telling me about her husband or what she got the grandkids for Christmas—we're two short, fat women with twenty-five years between us.

I miss the butcher at New Seasons the most. He is clearly married (I ringspotted him) but flirts with me anyway, and I suspect often cheats the scale on my purchases.

It's week nine of isolation for me here in Oregon, where I am trapped by the walls of my house, a statewide shelter-in-place order, and the crap immune disorder with which I was born. I have gone through the stages of grieving for what was my life and the eighteen months that lay ahead—sadness, anger, bargaining—and I have arrived at what I like to call "Acceptance Adjacency." I will accept, with some grace, that I cannot touch my healthcare-employed boyfriend for the next eighteen months until "Vaccine Valhalla," or host dinner parties, or run to the hardware store when I need things. I have surrendered my autonomy to Grubhub and curbside pickup.

But what has become clear to me is that the absence that hits the hardest is the grocery store. Safeway: I just can't quit you. I am but one person lolling about a tiny kitchen, but I've been cooking my whole life. Pickling, preserving, freezing. Cooking for neighbors, hosting brunches for twelve, a forty-person Passover Seder in a tent in the front yard. This was made possible by exceptional kitchen organization and frequent trips to the store. I realize now that running into the store was what running to the spa is for others. It was a reason to break away from my work for a bit. I would roam the aisles and consider what fruit was in season, or if I should bother making a batch of kreplach on a lark.

I am, don't you worry, well fed. I am a creature of preparation, and prepared to settle in for the duration in early February, packing extra into the freezer with each grocery run. This is a privilege I don't take for granted—when friends bemoan the long view of my home confinement, I remind them there are few people better prepared for the apocalypse. No MREs here... there's duck rillettes in my freezer, and my pickled nasturtiums and homemade fermented mustard to pair with them.

But every few weeks, fresh fruit becomes a want or it will be time to get some more meat or toothpaste. On my block, neighbors have designated themselves shoppers, and stand in line with lists for myself and the sharp-tongued senior at the end of the block. At some point I hire my friend Shea, an enthusiastic optimist vegetarian who spends three hours skipping through Fred Meyer in no particular order despite my list, with pictures, organized by section of supermarket. I tried Instacart, twice. What becomes clear is that while these are delightful people with every good intention—everyone except me is a truly terrible grocery shopper.

I never really considered how I shop. That it's worth going into Safeway just for the bags of grapefruit, with their perfectly ripe ruby insides and thin skins; vastly different from the loose ones at every other store, all pith and underripe pulp. The Asian market that has the particularly thick wonton skins and soybean sprouts I like where I'll inevitably buy packaged noodles simply because of the cartoon on the packaging. The small carniceria in Wilsonville with carnitas to die for, and the panela and salty sour cream I love, an island of Latinx authenticity in a sea of particularly white suburbia. The way people shop for clothes or shoes or homewares—like that, but make it edible.

Grocery shopping isn't about fulfillment, the way Instacart and Amazon treat it—a race to complete so they can pay their workers the bare minimum, completed by kindhearted folk who think a boneless pork loin is an acceptable substitution for a pork shoulder. Grocery shopping is ritualistic—religious. I believe in the cheese suggestions

of the monger at Fred Meyer. I praise the butcher who puts whole chickens on sale each Tuesday. I sing “Glory hallelu” when the fishmonger understands that I’d like two pieces of facing, matching salmon so I can make gravlax. It’s a weirdly complicated ask that took years to figure out how to explain. Am I supposed to put that in the preferences on Instacart and cross my fingers? I’m religious but not dogmatic.

None of the delivery services shop at the Asian markets, or the Mercado, or the Russian grocer. These stores do not exist in virtual-land.

I write “ask the butcher for a lamb shank bone for Passover” on the list for my friend, who, in the new economy, grocery shops professionally. She texts me a picture of osso buco, insisting this is what they gave her, so I call and say, “I am a horrible, terrible person, but can you please go back and just say ‘Passover’ again?” She texts back a minute later that the head butcher heard, understood, and the shank bone is secured.

The grocery bills are astronomical; not just because of fees and tips and surcharges for my food being dropped off at my door, but because in this new world, there is no

bargain shopping. I write that I’d like chicken thighs, but really, what’s on sale would heavily influence my cooking. I simply chose the largest dish soap in any scent for the least money, and if the avocados didn’t look great any particular week, I just didn’t buy any. I haven’t figured out how to put that into my virtual basket.

I think about this each time I reach for my keys to go to the store, only to remember what the outside really means. I am haunted by Karen and Shirley and Hot Butcher Dude (he doesn’t wear a nametag, he’s too cool for labels). I wonder about their health. Are they okay? Shirley’s husband has emphysema, I remember. Do they know I am thinking about them? That I haven’t abandoned them on purpose? Do they wonder where certain customers have gone? Do they have time to think about it in the chaos? Will it be weird if I hug them and cry when I see them again in a year, maybe two?

I have thought about sending cards.

“I miss you and I am thinking of you, often. I never really thanked you enough for understanding the thing about the Salmon. I hope your whole family is okay, and please, please, stay safe. I’m coming back, someday, I promise.” 