



A Pandemic Navigation, Early On

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Rain fell from slate gray clouds, steady and cold. I stood, sheltered by my umbrella, on a red X taped to the sidewalk. Nineteen people on nineteen Xs preceded me in line, each six feet from the next, quiet, masked, apart.

It was two days before Easter, the twenty-third day of shelter-in-place.

Next to the store's entrance, a sturdy young woman in a Trader Joe's hoodie, her jeans soggy from the rain, sprayed shopping carts with disinfectant. She set them side by side, an easy reach for customers finally given the nod to enter, ten at a time once ten had exited the store.

A tall, loose-limbed employee sauntered down the line, maintaining distance, with an armful of golf umbrellas. He held one above himself—maroon, with bright yellow Trader Joe's emblems.

"Need an umbrella while you wait?" he asked those without. No takers. "You sure?"

I smiled at him, relieved by his jolliness, forgetting that my mask hid the smile.

The line moved forward for the next ten customers to enter, including me. I took a cart and crossed inside to the smell of bleachy disinfectant. I hadn't been here since sheltering began.

Before the pandemic, I shopped for groceries frequently and happily. I favored different stores for different items, each brimming with promise and potential—Northgate Gonzales, Himalayan Bazaar, Vine Ripe, Sprouts, Vons, Costco, Trader Joe's.

It was different now. To minimize exposure, I shopped seldom and close to home, mostly at Sprouts, but my Trader Joe's list had grown long enough to warrant this expedition. I most hoped for their cornbread mix, better than any from-scratch cornbread recipe I'd ever tried. A sack of flour, scarce these days, would be good, too.

I steered toward produce, stood back to wait a safe turn at the berries, took a box of blues. Employees, silent and serious, circulated, restocked, monitored. I moved on to mushrooms, asparagus, tomatoes, aware of others keeping distance from me as I did from them. Cheddar, Parmesan, chicken. I chose quickly and moved along. Eggs, milk, yogurt.

I was a robot among robots, unreadable behind my mask as the rest were behind theirs. Walnuts, raisins, pistachios. Somber, weighty, unnerving.

An employee stood watch at each end of each aisle. "Please wait a minute, sir," one said to the man a few feet behind me. "You can go as soon as someone leaves at the

other end.” Olive oil, red wine vinegar, Basmati rice.

Sheltering-in-place for me was restrictive but easy enough, far removed from the danger, suffering, and heartbreak in the paper each morning and on the news each night. A box of tomato soup, a jar of mayonnaise, a can of chickpeas.

In the baking section, I saw one single sack of all-purpose flour. A lesser angel suggested I take it, knowing I’d hoped for a backup sack in my pantry, but a better angel elbowed me that the canister at home was three-quarters full, and someone would no doubt come with greater need. I left the flour, my consolation a box of the prized cornbread mix.

I wheeled past frozen foods and breads to the alcohol aisle. A bottle of rye whiskey.

In this time of chilling uncertainty, a Manhattan cocktail and a Zoom happy hour with a cherished human or two was a warming, edge-softening thing.

At the checkout stand, two cashiers startled me with their lively welcome. “How long did you have to wait outside?” the young woman asked. She shook out a couple of paper sacks as the young man rang up my groceries.

“About twenty minutes. Not bad,” I said. “But I don’t need sacks. My shopping bags are there in the cart.”

“Sorry, we’re not allowed to touch them. We have to use ours. No charge.”

“Oops, I should have known,” I said. We shared amazement at how quickly things had changed and parted with “Stay well” wishes. I was heartened by the brief, face-to-face—mask-to-mask—connection, a sliver of almost-normalcy.

Beside the exit, another employee asked if I’d like a complimentary treat from one of the cartons on the table she stood behind. Gummy sharks. Jelly beans. Chocolate mousse eggs.

I leaned in for a closer look. *Velvety chocolate egg-shaped cakes layered with silky mousse* read the label on the clear plastic package. Six little confections, each glazed with dark chocolate and a squiggle of pink.

“The chocolate,” I said, and placed the box among my groceries.

I was effusively grateful for this small act of kindness—it took on metaphor and meaning perhaps beyond the store’s intent, perhaps not—but I could barely manage a thank you as my throat closed and my eyes filled.

Rain continued to fall outside. The line of waiting customers stretched far. I pulled the hood of my rain jacket onto my head and, as I maneuvered the cart toward my car, tried to protect the three bags of groceries with my umbrella, especially the one with the chocolate mousse eggs.

