

A TRIP TO THE GROCERY

TERESA MILBRODT

You can see for a long distance in Ohio. I forget that. I forget how much I like gray and rain, or maybe I'm accustomed to weather that it feels like home, sober and contemplative. I enjoy the new car smell in my sister's Toyota, and I hate the new car smell in my sister's Toyota. I read that it comes from an aerosol can and gives you cancer.

"Didn't you get this car a few months ago," I say.

"We don't drive it much," she says. "I'd rather bike to work. But it was a good deal."

Do you have money for this car? Where did you get the money for this car? Are you making that much at the hospital admissions desk? Isn't that stressful? Do people come in bleeding?

We park approximately eight miles from the grocery store entrance.

"Afraid of door dings?" I ask.

"I like the exercise." Our parents moved to Florida four years ago and I'm living in Kentucky, so she's the only one left in my hometown.

Do you feel abandoned? Are you capable of feeling abandoned?

My sister has one emotional setting. Chill. Calm. Can you be born a Zen monk? It's an attitude I envy. An attitude that drives me up the wall. How do you talk with someone who greets every story

with a nod? She grabs shopping bags from the back seat. She's said ten sentences since I arrived this morning, after nine months of not seeing each other. "Hey there," she told me when I walked into the apartment. She was at her computer, composing an e-mail. The hug came later. I tackle friends and family members in an embrace, even if I saw them yesterday.

"She changed the way I operate," her boyfriend said last Christmas. "I was used to buying flowers and candy and gifts for girlfriends. But she smiles in that way of hers, whether I give her a dozen roses or a dandelion."

Isn't there a rule you have to kiss someone after they bring you a dozen roses?

I've told my parents that my husband and I are filing for bankruptcy, and his ice cream shop is closing. We'll have my retirement and health insurance, should be able to squeak by financially and maritally while he drags through the job postings and sells himself to another ad firm. I needed a weekend away. We've both been snippy.

This is after my first mammogram came back inconclusive, and the second mammogram came back inclusive, and my gynecologist said they should do a biopsy, which meant needles, which meant a week of near-terror waiting for results. Negative. I barely remember what I taught my third graders for most of October.

I trudge after my sister. Should buy some fruit. Antioxidants. I drink three cups of green tea every day. Japanese women get less breast cancer. I read a study on that.

Doesn't too much sugar lead to tumors? Damn ice cream.

I used to know where to find things in the grocery store, but everything is different. They ripped out the gym and Mexican restaurant next door, and expanded to include a deli, coffee shop, cheese and wine section, and racks of clothing.

"It's too much," I say, wading through the chill air.

My sister shrugs and peers at the bananas.

"Do you buy organic?" I ask.

"Not really," she says.

"I'm starting to," I say, though she will not ask me why.

Everyone at school gives me lingering looks when I'm in the main office making copies, wanting to ask about test results. Others know about the ice cream shop and say my husband can get on the sub list to tide us over while he's on the market. When I tell my sister about everything she'll nod. No swift intake of breath. No frown. I want people to be concerned, so I can tell them everything will be fine.

The extra keys to the front and back doors of the ice cream shop are in my pocket. I've been feeling their weight for the past two weeks. My husband sold the chairs and tables and freezers and surplus of plastic ware and napkins.

While my sister examines oranges, I drop the keys in a pile of grapefruit.

"How are you guys doing?" I asked her boyfriend before we went to the store.

I want the secrets, the imperfections, the stories.

He peered out the window over my shoulder. "It's like she's sitting in an inner tube rolling over the waves."

I dive into the waves, get smacked in the face, have water go up my nose.

Would you please be a little more dramatic so I don't have to take it all on myself?

My husband has apologized too many times for fucking up. It's not fucking up, I say, it's following a dream. He says they're not mutually exclusive. He's slept on the couch three nights this past week, not because of tense talk but because of tossing and turning in bed.

On Wednesday he bought eggs and milk and an extra large bottle of antacids. He will not be happy that I lost my keys, but if they're going to change the locks anyway, why will it matter? I look for cues to my sister's life in her cart: bananas, oranges, raisin bran, chicken breasts, tomato sauce, vitamin C tablets.

"I thought too much vitamin C can make you sick," I say.

"They're not for me," she says. "Do you need anything else?"