

# I'M GOING TO THE STORE

An ordinary errand fills more than just the pantry.

BY ALISON MILLER

IN A PHOTO TAKEN ON MARCH 16, 2020, I stand in the kitchen like a hunter showing off the pelt of a slain beast. Instead of a prized kill, I hold a receipt that stretches from my hips to six inches above my head. I'd ventured into the dangerous world and returned with food to sustain my family for weeks.

We'd left for vacation ten days earlier, when coronavirus was a nascent threat, foreboding, but far away. By the time we returned, our six-year-old daughter's elementary school had shut its doors and the mayor had declared a state of emergency.

Back then, cities were virus hellscape. Driving fifty miles from Athens, Georgia, where we live, to Hartwell, Georgia, where I grew up, felt necessary. *The stores in my small hometown will be less crowded*, I reasoned. I tied the straps of a flower-print mask behind my head and heaped a cart with glass jars of spaghetti

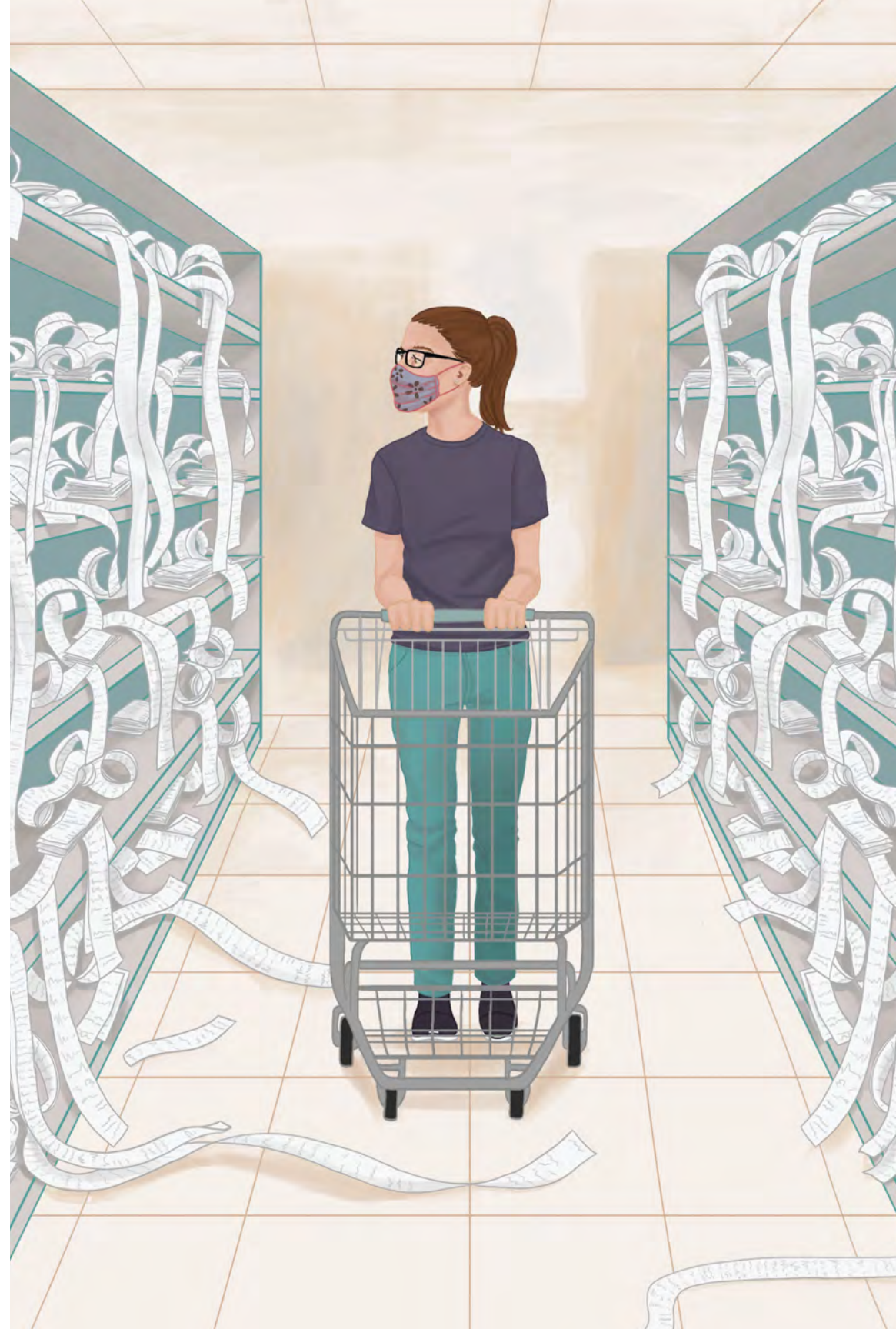
sauce, boxes of pasta, and bags of frozen vegetables.

Summer came and went, then fall. Two adults, a first-grader, and a puppy, my family lived in a house with a square footage that seemed to cinch every day. Instead of writing, I crafted butterflies out of coffee filters and helped Avery solve math problems on a school-issued iPad.

The grocery store became a place of responsible refuge, a thrill with a respectable motive: We had to eat. It combined the selfless act of providing for the family with the pleasure of getting the hell away from them. Everything was in its place here: tidy shelves and buffed floors, free of scattered toys and construction-paper clippings, an antidote to the chaos and uncertainty of home.

Instead of shopping every two weeks, I began to go two or three times a week. Rather than driving fifty miles, I drove one mile to Bell's Food Store on

illustrations by Lindsey Bailey



Hawthorne Avenue in Athens. Some days I walked the aisles at 7 A.M., basking in the muffled hellos of masked employees and shoppers and searching for connection in the eyes of strangers. I'd return home with ingredients for a pot of soup, log our daughter in to virtual school, and have dinner finished by 9 A.M. I felt powerful. I might not read or write a word, but I'd cooked a meal, and that was something. Maybe we'd get through this.

The sound of a metal cart clattering over vinyl tile cues a reel of supermarket memories. The grocery store was my mom's place, and she too visited often. I remember trailing her as she learned her way around the Bell's store in Hartwell when we moved there thirty years ago. I see myself as a tow-headed girl piling

special occasions, my brother and I followed her through the labyrinth of Harry's Farmers Market in Marietta, Georgia, staring into the stunned eyeballs of red snapper while she ordered shrimp from a white-aproned employee. In the parking lot, we watched her maneuver the haul into an ice-filled cooler in the back of our minivan for the two-hour drive home.

The morning of her first chemo treatment, she and I left the house with a bucket and a pack of Depends. A nurse had told her how sick she might get, and she wanted to be ready. She sat in a vinyl recliner, warm blanket on her lap, toxic chemicals streaming through her veins, and pulled a pen from her purse to add to the shopping list for Thanksgiving dinner the next day. After, we drove to Whole Foods in Decatur. She'd never pass up the opportunity to hit a good grocery store.

Perhaps she knew something that I have only recently come to understand. Faced with the insurmountable, buying groceries is achievable. It's progress—a simple problem solved in a complicated world where singular effort often feels futile.

A few months after she died in 2014, my dad drove to Texas to visit (we lived in Dallas; my brother had settled in Austin). He brought Mom's purse, a small shoulder bag she'd assembled on her basement sewing machine. Our job was to clean it out. We were in the action chapter of grieving then: The satisfaction of checking a task from a list shrouded a deeper, yet-untapped grief. We gathered around the granite island in my brother's apartment kitchen and my dad pulled credit cards from her wallet. Jason noted them on a yellow legal pad, cut them up, and threw them away.

My dad pulled out a folded stack of receipts and handed them to me. "We

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don't need these anymore, right?" I flipped through. Walmart, Ingles. "Nope." I added them to the trash pile.

Seven years later, I have no regrets about filling garbage bags with clothes she hadn't worn in years, but *goddamn*, I wish I had those receipts. I'd hold them in my hands like treasure maps and retrace her steps. I'd ponder what meals she had in mind when she plucked a can of diced tomatoes from the shelf or dropped onions into a plastic bag. Did she consider a bunch of celery and wonder if she'd cook her way through it before she died? Or did the forward motion of this quotidian task steer her toward hope?

My mom's two sisters took turns caring for her in those last few weeks. By the time I flew home, she was sleeping in a hospital bed and moving around the house in a wheelchair that someone had to push. I recently asked my aunt Terri what she remembered about that last trip to the grocery store. "I remember her pleasure in doing that simple task," she wrote in a text message, "and her

probably finding some peace in still being a player in that arena where she had always been."

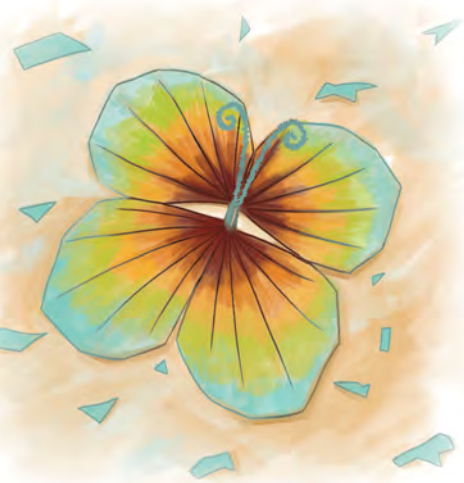
Two weeks after she died, my husband, Dan; Avery, then six months old; and I flew back to Georgia for a visit. My parents' fridge and pantry, once sites of abundance, sat sparse and untended. I woke up early the next morning and drove to Ingles. I had barely put the car in park before my forehead hit the steering wheel and I dissolved into a gasping cry. "I don't know how I'm going to do this," I texted my aunts.

Eventually the tears stopped. I inspected my face in the visor mirror, slung my purse over my shoulder, and walked toward the sliding glass doors. I grabbed hold of a shopping cart and, like her, like so many others before us, started pushing.

On a recent early morning trip to Bell's, I turned the corner from frozen foods and pointed my cart toward the checkout lanes. The woman standing behind the prepared foods counter looked up. "How you doing, baby?" she asked. "Good," I said. It was true. 🐾

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honey-wheat bread and Oscar Mayer bologna on the conveyor belt in this place we now called home.

Every family vacation started with a trip to the grocery store. On pilgrimages to my parents' homeland of western New York, that meant a double-cart odyssey to Wegmans, land of loganberry juice, Kummelweck rolls, and deli hot dogs strung together by their casing. On