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Sunday Journal

Home among the yogurt and cookies

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I never expected to look for home in a supermarket. Especially since I was home, in an Odyssean kind of way. I moved to my babyhood home in Athens from my grown-up home in Raleigh two years ago, hoping to kindle the familial warmth I had experienced on episodic visits.

I had given up a lot to come here, and not just my friends, my job, my car and my identity as a transplanted American Southerner. I had also forfeited my supermarket.

The six years I lived in Raleigh, I spent a large chunk of my earnings at the Whole Foods on Wade Avenue. I was lured not only by the Drunken Goat cheese, Javanese tofu and fresh-baked vegan chocolate-peanut butter bars but also by the place itself -- cavernous yet bright, governed by earthy people who seemed to radiate coolness.

The place was my hangout -- a supermarket version of Cheers. My favorite cashier, a once-pallid guy who had gone rosy-cheeked by breakfasting on water instead of coffee, dispensed health advice in a newly muscular voice and always offered the same salutation: "See you tomorrow!"

There is no such love at the supermarkets in my central Athenian neighborhood.

On Patisson Street, the main drag, there is a homely market called Atlantik, which appears to specialize in outdated L'Oreal hair mousse and acidic, eggplant-haired cashiers who insist that I pay with the exact change. Near the graffiti-sprayed Schools of Gravas is a smaller grocery with way too many chocolate-flavored cereals and even meaner cashiers. Near a pedestrian mall through which people insist on driving their cars, there is another market staffed by a truly tragic Greek figure, a black-haired woman who sighs when she rings up my yogurt and occasionally manages a small-voiced, bleak "Be well."

I never look forward to returning tomorrow.

Comfort on Aisle 3

My supermarkets have always been comforting, with a communal gathering of people picking out segments of their food pyramids while looking relaxed in crumpled sweat clothes and yesterday's hairstyle.

In Minneapolis, where I went to college, I discovered a highfalutin grocery called Byerly's. It had lighting fixtures that could pass for chandeliers, fresh-made sushi, imported cookies and an eat-in cafe. I went there at least twice a week, fondling the passion fruit or buying giant cinnamon-apple bagels, even though my mother dutifully noted that everything cost double what it did at other grocery stores.

When I moved to Raleigh, she began to worry that my obsession had become a full-blown addiction, like gambling or smoking or loving men with Napoleonic complexes.

I went to Whole Foods nearly every day. Switched off from reporter mode, I acquired another role and relished it: the girl with the yogurt habit, who buys soy sausages and fake-meat Carolina barbecue even though she is not a vegetarian, who cannot properly pronounce challah bread but asks for it every weekend, who drinks her shade-grown coffee while flipping through a yoga magazine.

Yet I also knew the grocery-store-as-a-social-refuge routine was a bit pathetic, a substitute for facing the world and making an effort to be a part of it. So when I moved to Athens, I quit cold turkey.

I tried the open-air vegetable markets, but they were crowded with fat old ladies who elbowed me out of the way when I wanted to buy oranges. I went to the butcher shops but found them too naked, with their just-plucked chickens and lamb heads. I bought bread at a lonely bakery run by a depressed woman who smoked too much, which made me decide to stop eating bread altogether.

I had other problems, of course. Athens was turning out to be a hard place to live, with its stunning disorganization, minuscule sidewalks blocked by illegally parked cars and fake leftists in Che T-shirts who stopped pontificating into their cell phones only long enough to blame me for the Bush administration. My editing job was unfulfilling, and freelancing from Greece was harder now that the Olympics were yesterday's news. I was reduced to pitching stories about international donkey conferences on Greek islands once frequented by Leonard Cohen.

With few friends to be made and few stories to write, I turned again to supermarkets. But the fiefdoms of grumpy cashiers with bad dye jobs were as welcoming as the cell-phone-wielding fake leftists.

Like it or not, I was on my own.

It's not about the tofu

At the end of a crazed visit to Raleigh for a wedding earlier this year, I spent my last few hours in town at Whole Foods, reliving the old days.

I greeted my favorite cashier, who looked startled to see me after all this time. Since I left Raleigh, the store had gotten much bigger. It felt a little foreign, but still far more comforting than Atlantik.

I bought tofu and fake-meat Carolina barbecue to take to Minnesota for the last leg of my trip before flying to Greece. I lunched on sushi and shade-grown coffee. Then I looked out the window, felt a deep longing for my Honda and ate to keep from crying.

The tears came as I drove to the airport in my rental car, and my eyes were red and puffy when I reached Minneapolis. My mother asked if I was really so crazy as to be crying over a supermarket. But she knew the answer, and so did I.

I didn't miss the store. I missed the person I used to be.

A newspaper reporter who loved to tell stories, who told the university students she taught that journalism is a great calling, who returned their papers occasionally specked with shade-grown coffee. Who ate Javanese tofu at least twice a week, went on gossip hikes with her best friend Andrea, then dragged her to the bakery for a vegan peanut butter cookie. Who often ate alone, even if she didn't like the idea of being alone, because it was comforting to eat interesting food in a moodily lit cavern that bustled with kind-faced strangers and not-so-strangers.

I missed me.

In search of gouda

About a week after I returned to Athens, I noticed that an enormous construction site where an old-timey movie theater once stood had opened as a multifloor supermarket owned by the AB Vassilopoulos chain.

The Vassilopoulos stores claim to stock everything -- soy milk, French jam, Skippy peanut butter, cheddar cheese and even imported chocolate chip cookies.

Still recovering from my North Carolina homesickness, I had become obsessed with making the macaroni and cheese I had eaten at Foster's Market in Durham. The recipe required both smoked gouda and cheddar, neither of which I could find at the grumpy neighborhood groceries. So I walked to the new superstore, trying not to get too excited. The last thing I needed was another grocery store to use as a social crutch.

After I found the cheeses, I drifted upstairs and smiled at the row of Elsa's Story cookies, convinced that I was hearing a gospel choir as I reached for a box, not yet worried that this imported box of Israeli cookies felt like the most familiar thing in Athens.

"See you tomorrow," I told the cashier, a young woman with an ocean-kissed complexion.

"Be well," she said.

As I entered the noisy street of my not quite home city, not quite adjusted to the new me, I decided this not-so-mean cashier might actually mean it.

Joanna Kakissis is a former News & Observer staff writer. Debbie Moose's Sunday Dinner column will return next month.