

The Food Is Great

Simone Wessels
Leipzig, Germany

Dec 02, 2010 at 10:36 am

Subj: **If you can make it there**

Dear Dr. Koch

I admit, I was skeptical at first, but now, sitting in a real New York diner, watching the Big Apple get a bright, white frosting one snowflake at a time, I think you were right. This will change things. This will bring closure. A weight seems to be lifted off my shoulders, the sky seems to be higher (which, I guess, is a result of the skyscrapers making more of an effort to keep it from the ground than your average German building). Another thing you were right about: My writer's block seems to fade.

I checked into the hotel a few hours ago and spent the rest of my jetlag exploring the city. I had a hot dog at the Rockefeller Center Christmas tree (the most Freudian of all Christmas trees?), and I swear I've never had a better one in all my life. Now I'm drinking lots of coffee at the hotel bar while practicing not looking like a tourist.

Maggy called, she will meet me later today and take me to dinner, then to a party at a friend's place. I'm a bit nervous, but that's a good thing, right?

Yes, I'm taking my pills.

Dec 02, 2010 at 9:02 pm

Subj: **Re: If you can make it there**

Dear Doctor

Glad to report that Maggy is still the pasty-faced bridesmaid-to-be I remembered from my year abroad. I don't know whether to ascribe her high-pitched screams and the surprisingly forceful grip of her stubby arms to real affection or the alleged American custom of drowning your guests in corn syrupy streams of friendliness. It's been eight years, how can she be that happy to see me? Be that as it may: I'm smiling a lot without having to fake it. Dinner was great, we're in a cab and getting ready to paaaarteey.

Dec 05, 2010 at 4:24 pm

Subj: **I'm stupid**

Dear Dr. Koch

Coming here was the worst idea EVER! I reread my first two messages a few times, just to make sure that I was really that stupid. "This will change things"?!

PS: Here's what happened. The party was great, everything was perfect. I did what you told me to do: I talked to people. And while doing so, I started to remember that I could actually be very funny and extremely charming. Soon I met Thomas (the guy whose party it was), and we hit it off instantly. I told him about my fantastic hot dog at the Rockefeller Center, and he laughed and told me about this place downtown ("They serve the world's greatest hot dog there. You can't leave until you have tasted the world's greatest hot dog!"). We decided to meet there the day after the party.

I woke up the next morning to find that Maggy had defriended me on Facebook. I wondered how happy-go-lucky Maggy had the capacity to be so pathetic and childish, and, to be honest, I wasn't sure whether I'd said or done something to offend her (alcohol and other drugs tend to make my thoughts audible, as you know). I called her, she didn't answer, I called her again and again, and finally she picked up, and after a lot of You-know-exactly-what-you-dids she admitted that she'd had "the hot" for Thomas for "like forever" and that I had stolen him. I felt no need to apologize and I told her so (we last saw each other when we were 17, we're not best friends, and she never informed me of her crush), she then hung up on me, and now we don't talk. No more squeaky noises and "Honey!"s for me.

As for Thomas: We had a great time, had our hot dogs, walked through the city and talked. Later we had dinner at a small Italian restaurant. Everything went perfectly fine, and I felt really great until I told the waitress that I would pay for myself. Things got awkward, and it dawned on me that while I had simply been enjoying some new and interesting company, Thomas had been on a date. All he said when we left was "I'll call you," which (as my pop culture knowledge tells me) is American for "Fuck you!"

So this is why I haven't seen or talked to anyone for the last two days. Instead I've rarely left my hotel room and ordered a healthy menu of pizza, lasagna, and hot dogs. Because the one thing that does not suck here is the food.

PPS: I've written Will a few e-mails but he hasn't answered yet. I hope Maggy hasn't started a campaign against me. If so, New Year's Eve in Chicago will be pretty lonely too.

Dec 06, 2010 at 11:58 am

Subj: **Re: I'm stupid**

Dear Dr. Koch

New Year's Eve with Will is off! His wife's mother is sick, and they'll be in Florida. Now that's just fucking great! I'm stuck in New York for another three weeks and then I'll drive my car, already rented, to Chicago to welcome the new year alone in my hotel room, already booked.

Life truly is a banquet!

Dec 07, 2010 at 2:46 pm

Subj: **Fuck you**

Yes I am taking my goddamn pills! Is that all you care about? What do you mean, “Things will get better”?! Three years of therapy and I’ve never heard this kind of rehashed feel-good rubbish from you. I guess it makes sense since (you never got tired of telling me) New York is the city that “made psychotherapy digestible fast food for the masses.” It shouldn’t surprise me that you seem to be adapting to this dirty pile of metal shells stuffed with the world’s finest neurotics so much better than I am.

Also my diet is none of your business. And don’t call my dad, my sister, or anyone! They’ll just be worried – which is totally unnecessary since “things will get better.”

Dec 10, 2010 at 5:12 pm

Subj: **I’m sorry**

Dear Volker,

sorry for my outburst. Also sorry for the long silence. I’m calmer now, and I understand that you were only trying to reach out to me as a friend since you can’t really be my therapist right now. Also thanks for having my dad call me, that was very nice and oedipal of you. I hope you can forgive me.

I’ve been doing what you suggested: walking and exploring the city. But it doesn’t seem to inspire me. I’ve tried to find and friend some old, Chicago-based acquaintances of Johannes’s on Facebook but I guess nothing will come of it since they probably don’t remember him from a two-week stay nine years ago. Thinking about it now, I’m kinda glad they haven’t answered. “Hey, I’m Alexandra, former girlfriend of Johannes. You knew him some time ago, but he’s been dead for four years now, and thus you never met me. Now let’s spend New Year’s Eve together!”

The day before yesterday, I knocked on Maggy’s door for fifteen minutes, then I left a letter in her mailbox, telling her that I am sorry and that I’d like to be friends with her again. She hasn’t answered. Now who’s pathetic and childish?

I know you’re there for me, I know that people care about me, I know I’ll be home in a few weeks. I’ll try to follow your advice and write something. Maybe I can make something good out of this. I am in New York after all!

Dec 14, 2010 at 04:54 am

Subj: **Where are you?**

Alexandra, where are you? Please answer your phone. I'm really worried about you. A single word would be enough.

Dec 24, 2010 at 2:23 am

Subj: **(no subject)**

Dear Doctor, here I am! And here are all the e-mails I wrote but didn't send. Merry Christmas.

I've stolen three ornaments from the hotel lobby Christmas tree in the last three days. My collection is growing, and nobody seems to notice. The pockets of my bathrobe are deep.

I know that I should get out more, and since the hotel itself is now devoid of new challenges (I managed to steal one of the fake Christmas presents from the lobby, my work here is done), I guess that means I'll actually go "outside." But I know I shouldn't just walk around aimlessly, so I've decided to further explore the New York hot dog scene. I've planned tours to all the hot-dog-selling places I could find online.

I don't even particularly like hot dogs but they seem to be this trip's central theme. I know it's not very clever, ironic at best.

It's snowing all the time now, but as soon as the white flakes touch the ground they become part of the soggy, dirty mess that is this city. I guess my initial New York Fairytale cliché has transformed into a worn-out postmodernist platitude. Can you really say anything about anything in this country without warming up stale leftovers from a generation of guys with a severe depression and an unhealthy relationship with scotch? It's not even worth trying.

The trash. You can't imagine it. Heaps upon heaps of plastic, cloth, and rotten food in huge garbage containers, rats rummaging through it all, automatically adding their bodies to the pile when they die and raising their children off of it. There's not enough snow in the world to cover the trash up again and again, day by day as it just keeps on growing. I find myself adding more and more half-eaten hot dogs to the heaps. There's simply too much of everything here and not enough of me.

I think I just slept for three days.

This was supposed to be the final goodbye to Johannes and all that I've denied myself since he died. I was supposed to find myself here, and now all I find is that no hot dog tastes like the other.

Not to sound arrogant or to oversimplify things, but my three weeks here have taught me that this one sentence is all you'll ever need to know about America: Hot dogs are the epitome of everything that is wrong with this country.

Hot dogs are the dream of something good that everybody can achieve. Every street corner screams HOT DOG at you, and your stiff, frozen fingers fumble in your pockets for your hard-earned cash – and in the wink of an eye the dream is yours. But nothing happens. Because all you're doing is munching away on a soggy bun that contains nothing more than meat leftovers that weren't good enough on their own and thus had to be shredded and pressed into something that vaguely resembles your own intestines, digestion making you a bloated meta hot dog in the process.

That sounds about right.

Maybe I could write more about hot dogs, an in-depth report or a poem, but all the rhymes are silly (dog, log, fog – OMG hot dog spelled backwards is toh god!).

Or maybe I'm drunk.

Dec 25, 2010 at 7:23 pm

Subj: **A partridge in a pear tree**

I went down to the lobby to look at the tree and the receptionists were smiling and humming along to the Christmas songs that were ringing softly from the lobby speakers.

I sat down at a small table at the hotel restaurant and ordered the first thing I saw on the menu, but then I couldn't bring myself to eat it. I just sat there and looked at the blurry, colorful mess on the plate while all around me people were chatting and enjoying their meals. Suddenly the waitress was right beside me and asked if everything was all right. I nearly screamed at her: "Not only am I more desperate at this precise moment than I have been for the last depression- and fast-food-filled weeks, but I still miss him so much that I wish I'd finally disappear and there's nothing you or I or anyone can do about it!"

I smiled and said: "The food is great."

Dec 25, 2010 at 11:42 pm

Subj: **Re: A partridge in a pear tree**

Thanks again for calling. I feel a bit better. You're right, this is just an outburst, not the undoing of all we have achieved. I reread a lot, and I think I understand what you mean by "process." I'll try to sleep now. I'll write to you as soon as I wake up.

Dec 26, 2010 at 8:02 am

Subj: **Miles to go**

Dear Volker

I'm leaving tomorrow, as planned. It's about 800 miles to Chicago, I guess I'll take two or three days to drive there. Since nobody is waiting for me, I'm in no hurry (don't worry, I'll write every day so you don't have to worry about me again). I saw my family on Skype for a few seconds before the connection broke down, that was nice. Oh, and Maggy called to apologize. I told her I'd call her.

PS: The fake hotel lobby present contained an empty cardboard box. I put the photo of Johannes into it (couldn't just "let the wind take it away," i.e., throw it out of the window), re-wrapped it, and snuck it back under the tree.

Dec 27, 2010 at 12:35 am

Subj: **Re: Miles to go**

Dear Volker

On the road at last. It's nice to be able to look around you and not see walls that seem to go up forever. I can't really describe the landscape yet because I'm mostly concentrating on the road ahead (it's been eight years since I drove a car in the US, and that was in Iowa).

I just stopped at a gas station and had my first non-New-York hot dog (yes, I'm still doing that, I guess it's a thing now). It was awful, but that won't stop me. There's an app that shows you where to find places that sell hot dogs in a fifty-mile radius, it even has a ranking system. So maybe I'll be making a few more stops than I had originally planned. Maybe I'll reach Chicago before New Year's Eve, maybe I won't.

All I know right now is that I'll stuff myself with lots and lots of hot dogs along the way, eating myself happy one sorry excuse for a Bratwurst in a sticky bun at a time.

So be it.

Dec 27, 2010 at 12:38 am

Subj: **Re: Miles to go**

P.S. And don't give me any of your Freudian shit. Sometimes a hot dog is just a hot dog.

I'll write to you soon.