

COVID-19 Anxiety

LAURA JOHNSON¹

For my roommate Carrie's birthday in November of 2020, I was informed that Apartment 302 would be going out to dinner at Olive Garden. COVID-19 cases were hitting record highs – on that day alone, there were 1,176 new cases in Hennepin County. But – it was Carrie's 21st birthday. As I was informed, "You only get to go out on your 21st once." And so, despite the past several months of takeout and home cooking that we had collectively agreed was for the best, we bundled up in our winter coats and piled into my roommate Arya's car to drive to the nearest Olive Garden in Roseville.

Several months prior I had been diagnosed with generalized anxiety disorder. I was medicated and, for the most part, handling it well. The feelings of impending disaster and constant worrying were still there, but it was as if someone had lowered the volume on the tiny voice inside my head; however, on the car ride to Olive Garden, someone had cranked the volume up to max. This was my first time going out to eat in a restaurant for months – ever since the initial shutdown in March – and my brain was drowning in panic.

You are going to get COVID right before you go home for Thanksgiving.

You are going to kill Grandma.

Remember Grandma, the 86-year-old woman you are seeing in a week?

You are getting on a plane in several days.

You are going to give the entire plane and their extended families COVID, all because of this Olive Garden outing.

You are the next Typhoid Mary.

When I get anxious, it is hard for an outsider to tell. The only indication that there is World War III going on behind my eyes is that I scratch. I will scratch the front of my neck, right above my collarbones, until I nearly draw blood. In every single picture of this night my neck is blotchy and red. I still have a brilliant smile and am laughing in nearly every photo. I carried on conversations, cracked jokes, and told stories. I am a surprisingly functional anxious person. To the other patrons that

¹ All names in the narrative have been changed to protect anonymity.

LAURA JOHNSON is a pseudonym chosen by the author.

night, I am sure I looked like the picture of comfort, and like I regularly dined out during this pandemic. But I was not. I was suffocating.

At Olive Garden, I was delegated to talk to the hostess to get us a table. In the lobby, we were all wearing masks. The wait staff was all wearing masks. When people got up from their tables, they put on their masks. But when everyone was sitting, there were no masks. It did not make sense to my anxious brain. The risk of COVID-19 did not go away just because we were all sitting at a table. When my roommates and I took our seats, I thought about keeping my mask on. But another voice in my head told me: *This is Carrie's 21st. Do not make this about you.* The anxiety of being selfish vs. the anxiety of COVID battle in my head. I reluctantly took off my mask. I felt like a trapped animal, stuck in the far side of the booth, unable to leave, while maskless conversation from strangers' rage around me.

When the waiter came over to take our order and give us breadsticks, he was wearing his mask. I wonder how he felt, always wearing a mask while talking to people without them. I thought about what a strange indicator of class this is. Most patrons, eating out at the height of a pandemic, can afford to go without their masks. They can take PTO at work, or just work from home. Zoom is commonplace in the academic and corporate world. But that is not an option for the restaurant industry – if they get COVID-19, barring any COVID PTO from corporate, that is a complete loss of income. There is no alternative.

I barely remember what I ate. It was some kind of pasta and a bunch of breadsticks. I think. To be honest, I barely remember most of the night. I look back on pictures and all I can see is my splotchy red neck.

The fear and panic that came along with eating out in the time of COVID-19 stuck around for a long time. After that November night, it took a lot of internal convincing and another five months for me to go out to eat again. That night in November remained raw and distressing and a historical moment that I hated being a part of – but an historical moment, nonetheless. Over first eight months of the pandemic, something as unremarkable as an evening at Olive Garden became a source of dread. And while I can think back on this venture to an Olive Garden five miles away and know that everything turned out OK (I did not kill my grandma, and I did not spread COVID-19 to anyone and everyone I know) it does not change how I felt in the moment – terrified.