

So my ex-girlfriend accidentally had an apocalypse party for her birthday. March 7-8, 2020, a small group of friends gathered in Rochester for games and good times.

A week later, I was working 50 hour weeks back in Central Square.

It started like almost every retail store started: toilet paper. A customer came in on Thursday, March 12, surprised we had toilet paper. Walmart was out. The next day, we were out, too. The day after that, I sold our last two bottles of hand sanitizer. I told the woman that bought them that she probably shouldn't be buying face masks--healthcare workers would need the supply.

Then came the rush for dry goods. People weren't being pushy or rude, but demand was quickly outpacing supply. We put limitations on the essentials: bread, pasta, eggs, milk, meats. We assured people that anything in the meat department we were out of would be restocked the next day when the butchers came back in.

Before, we'd been receiving a grocery order once per week. Now, we ordered twice weekly. Less than half of what we ordered came in.

March ended with sales numbers that climbed beyond what we had ever seen before. Stay at home orders were being issued across the state, but everyone still had to go to the grocery store, of course.

We put up signs asking people to social distance. We put up notices of policy changes regarding purchase limits. There was discussion of what to do if anyone working got sick. There are less than a dozen of us and we were all working overlapping shifts. If one person got sick, it was highly likely others would as well.

With PPE being rightfully sent to healthcare workers, we donned plastic food services gloves in an effort to keep our hands clean. A plastic barrier went up between the cash registers and the customers.

On Easter Sunday, we tried to implement a policy of limiting the number of customers in the store at a given time, but that was soundly ignored.

Routine started up again as the weather warmed up finally. Masks were worn by employees but we had no means of enforcing it with customers. It was still busier than it had ever been, but the busy seemed to be routine.

At the end of summer, my family got together in the first multi-generational gathering we'd had since early March. Four generations, sitting in the back yard in our small household groups. I think that consensus was that we were over the worst of it by then. We didn't know, obviously, what fall would bring.

It didn't seem as scary as it had in March, and I think that was a big part of the problem. It was routine, and everyone was getting complacent with the routine. Then I saw the notice on the news: if you are out and about in public, assume you have been exposed. Then I looked at the numbers, compared them to spring and realized how much worse it was.

We canceled our family Thanksgiving. We had family Christmas via webcam. Exposure notices started to get closer and closer to home. My niece was exposed, prompting her parents to pull all their kids out of school. My coworker's sister tested positive and we held our breath waiting to see if she'd transmitted it to him over the holidays. She hadn't. We got lucky.

In February 2021, vaccine eligibility opened up for grocery workers like myself. More than half of our employees have been fully vaccinated now, with more planning when to get the shot. In March, I went back to Rochester--the first time in a year I'd gone more than 25 miles from home-

-for another birthday party. We played games and laughed and at one point, it came up. The conversation we'd had a year ago.

"As long as this makes people wash their hands and cover their mouths when they cough, it can't be that bad."

I'd said that a year ago. Before the rush for toilet paper, for hand sanitizer, for pantry and freezer staples. Before the plastic barriers. Before just the act of doing my own shopping was enough to trigger a panic attack.

A lot changes in a year, and I don't know how much of it is ever going to change back.