

Two Shots of Guilt

“Have you gotten your shots yet?” asked the thirty-something waitress of a local café. I stood at the counter to pay for a favorite banh mi sandwich. How odd to be inside anywhere except home. I wished to be the only customer. Others—and the air they exhaled— can come in after I leave. I had my first banh mi with a regular customer, a writing friend, and soon thereafter when I returned with my husband for another. But I hadn’t been back I over a year. We were in Phase Two in Washington State and my friend sent an email to support the place.

When the waitress went back to the kitchen to retrieve my order, the swing of the kitchen door brought whiffs of garlic, cilantro, and meat frying, and the clangs of cooking pans. But I felt my heart heavy in my chest for the owners when I walked in: a quiet room at lunchtime, five tables without chairs, and the now familiar blue taped stripe on the floor, first one six-feet from the counter and one more behind that one. Three customers at a time allowed inside and take-out only.

Over her shoulder on a wall, I saw a family photo, three little ones under the age of eight. My mask hid the warm blush of my privileged life rising into my cheeks that she, a nonessential worker, unsafe in this public setting, and won’t be vaccinated for months, needed this job to feed those grinning children. She faced whoever entered the café. Someone like me, a woman over the age of sixty-five.

I wanted to answer with the truth, “I just got my second yesterday,” with a wide toothy smile hidden behind my mask and the sparkle in my coffee-colored eyes that showed my relief. My joy. I pressed my feet firmly onto the vinyl flooring when my toes wanted to do a gleeful happy dance. *I’m safe, I’m safe in two weeks. I made it out alive.* Plus I didn’t spend time on the internet searching for available vaccination sites, hitting dead ends. My health care provider

contacted me by email to arrange my appointments: I showed up and left in 20 minutes after each shot. I cringed when I heard of friends traveling hours to other towns to get their first shots and return home to begin a new search for the second one.

But “I just got my second yesterday” sounded like taunting to the less fortunate, a “Nah nah nah, I got my two shots,” regardless of what words or tone of voice I use. So I mocked myself and changed the number, “Yeah, I got one cuz I’m old,” which felt gritty like sand in my mouth.

I left a large tip in the jar on the counter but didn’t feel any better for doing so. The money wasn’t enough to say, “I want you protected, too.” As I grabbed my bag of food and turned to leave, I thanked her and added my usual parting words used since the pandemic started, two words to remind people to be cautious and that I care about their wellbeing: “Stay safe.”

Her brown eyes smiled.

I know the statistics. Kaiser Health News reported that 16% of cases involved those over sixty-five, but that age group accounted for 80% of the deaths. I am scared of dying, especially from this virus. I’ve seen the pictures of people in hospital beds, on ventilators, saying their final words to a PPE clothed nurse holding an iPad connected to mourning family faces. Terrified. I want the shots to save me...yet what about those who must work *and* must wait for theirs? I feel my gut tighten, as if preparing for a punch. Tears gather behind my eyes, waiting to trickle down my cheeks with my unsaid words, “I am so sorry I am eligible.”

During my monthly book club, one of the women in the sixty-five-plus age bracket asked the Zoom screen’s ten boxes, “Whose gotten their shots?” Hands raised with fingers denoting number of vaccination. A lot of peace sign “V’s.” All of which sparked other related questions:

“What kind of reaction did you have with the first one? Any with the second?”

“Where did you get yours?”

Five of us retired and vaccinated. Five still working and not.

The book discussion waited.

These women were all educators in the last building where I worked. Former colleagues, now friends and fellow avid book readers. Even with their work and children, they read far more than me. While they were into the books assigned for future months *and* newly released ones from the New York Times best selling list, I was the one usually finishing the book the night before our meeting. Bright and learned women.

I scanned the five faces of ineligible-too-young-and-working members on the computer screen and looked for their wincing and grimaces, or eyes diverted down to phones in hands. I listened when they shared their parents’ health issues, which were the same as us older members: joint surgeries, cataracts, arthritis, falls, and new meds. COVID and vaccines joined the regular opening topics until one of them said, “OK, let’s talk about the book. I have the questions from the author’s website.”

I feel the inequality of being older and retired. Pre-shots, I quarantined more easily than them and hit the stores at odd hours when there were fewer customers. I don’t work, even part-time, as a substitute for the district. I was blessed with a good financial planner forty years ago, and, even on a teacher’s then school counselor’s salary, I will be comfortable the rest of my life, budget tight to the dime some months, but doable. Blessed... and I feel a hot guilt pulse through my veins with unanswered questions:

Why am I so blessed—lucky?—to have so much when others have so little?

What am I doing with my time left?

Will I make a difference with it?

They are being pushed by the state government to return to the classroom, to be among children whose parents may be “anti-vaxxers,” or too young themselves to be get shots. These parents want their children out of the house into classroom. “Get that building open!” is their chant, parents who learned teaching is hard work. Parents who appreciate schools more.

I am the one wincing in my Zoom box looking at these younger educators.

I cry after my computer screen darkens at the end of our meeting. Every month. The state of education wasn't how I left it for them, or how it should be. I watched good, really good teachers slowly show signs of burn-out. Cynical. Impatience with new rules, procedures, and the layers of bureaucracy. And now, COVID has plastered another challenge on an already difficult job. I count myself lucky to retire before it all hit the fan, but that, too, carries remorse. I can't do anything to help them. I once did from my counseling office, where they could help themselves anytime to a Disney Mickey Mouse tin can on a file cabinet filled with the colorful varieties of M&M's. I'd smiled to hear, “Oh, good, you have the almonds,” or “I need these peanut butter ones right now.” I was the sympathetic colleague when they plopped onto an office chair and shared the difficulties of classroom, home, and life. I can't do anything to help from my home, but pray that their world becomes better, easier, kinder.

I know the book club's families, listened to stories of their children and the retirees' grandchildren over a decade of books. When they return to the schools, these educators will expose their own darlin's at home to whomever walked into their classrooms or offices that day. They will hope the custodial staff had time to really, *really* clean their classrooms the night before and fill the Purell dispensers. Not taking any chances, they will probably buy their own large bottles of hand sanitizers, wipes, and a box of youth size masks, and place it all at an entry shelf for easy access. Another set on their desks. They will wipe down anything touched by

students that they may touch, too. They will go home, change clothes in the garage, and shower before meeting the family. But if they are greeted with, “What’s for dinner, Mom? I’m hungry,” they will thoroughly wash their hands and pray, as they take items out of the freezer, that their hands are cleaned enough tonight to protect their loved ones.

If given the opportunity, would I give away my shot appointment to one of them? No. I wish I had such courage. Instead I cling to my defense, “I was only doing what I was told to do. THEY said I should go first.” I had another rationale: my husband has COPD and that makes him more vulnerable to the virus. I must protect him, too.

So I did, twice. With a strong shot of good sipping tequila, I will toast my triumph. Make that two shots just to keep things even.

Word Count: 1513