

Coronavirus Sucks: Choose Your Own Adventure

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Choose your character:

- > Ambitious student
- > **Loyal daughter**
- > Loving girlfriend

Your adventure begins after you return from spring break vacation on a Monday. You were feeling refreshed and excited, head full of fun plans for the rest of the semester. You leave your first class of the day and walk through Rand.

- > **Stop and talk to a friend**
- > Walk on through

You say hi to your friend. You had both been hearing about the spread of a novel virus, and he seemed especially worried. He had a pre-existing condition that caused him to have a weaker immune system, something that had landed him in VUMC last semester. He mentioned he might take a leave of absence for the rest of the semester to be safe. You walk on, heading toward a lunch meeting you had.

- > **Allow yourself to worry**
- > Continue enjoying the day

You were worried about your friend and, by proxy, your mom. If you were exposed to the virus, could you even return home? You didn't want to put your family at risk. You allowed yourself to be anxious for a little, but like most other youth, you felt invincible. Vanderbilt—and your family—would be fine.

You receive the message at the start of art class.

- > **Open the article**
- > Ignore until later

“BREAKING: Vanderbilt junior contracts coronavirus visiting Barcelona over break”

“He reported that he was feeling slightly sick when he left Barcelona and started to feel worse, ‘slightly delirious,’ on his flight home.”

“‘If I had to guess, there were maybe 50 [Vanderbilt students] who were in Barcelona who went and came back [to Vanderbilt],’ Schulman said.”

It felt unreal. Campus was big though, right? It was just 50 out of 7,000 students.

- > Share with the class
- > **Forward to your mom**

You send the article to your mom. “Wash your hands like a crazy woman!!!” she said. She didn’t seem too worried, which made you feel better. Isolation and respirators felt like a world removed.

- > **Share with the class**
- > Go back to your art project

No one knew how to feel; there was a lot of discussion about blame and responsibility and what’s going to happen on campus. Your mind wanders back to your family. 50 out of 7,000. You hope that ratio is small enough. You can’t afford to get sick.

You are on your way to dinner, a needed break from some difficult astronomy homework. Your friend is checking her notifications.

“Oh my gosh... classes are cancelled for the week.”

You hear a shout of celebration from another person on the sidewalk. What? What’s going on?

- > **Ask your friend**
- > Check your own notifications

“What do you mean?”

“The University just sent an email out, we’re online through the end of March.”

- > **Check your own notifications**
- > Continue onto dinner

“Dear Vanderbilt University community...due to new information received today...cancelling all university classes for the remainder of this week...through at least March 30...moving to online...faculty will communicate...we ask for your understanding...”

- > Celebrate
- > Worry
- > **Dinner**

You had never done well with sudden change. As much as you joke that you were an adult now, independent and responsible, you were overwhelmed. You forward the email to your parents and head on up to the Pub with your friends. They would know what to do, what the best course of action was.

Your friend was relieved; they had been saved from a difficult test that was supposed to be on Wednesday. All you could think about was your mom.

Mom has played this type of game before, an earlier edition called “Cancer Sucks.”

- > **Game details**

It sets you up in a seven-year fight against one round of breast cancer, with a surprise second round of metastatic cancer spreading to the lymph nodes. Chemotherapy, surgeries, genetic tests, the BRCA1 gene. Watching your mother lose her hair, watching her still stay positive, and taking it at face value when your parents say, “It’s ok, this cancer isn’t deadly.”

These games are the worst because they’re interconnected. A continued fight with breast cancer follows you into the battle against COVID-19.

> **The connection**

Mom is now on long-term medicine with no visible side effects, just a pill after dinner and she’s happy and healthy. No visible side effects. She’s okay.

> **Look closer**

It’s the first on the list of serious side effects. “IBRANCE may cause low white blood cell counts...very common when taking IBRANCE...your doctor should check...”

While she seems healthy, her immune system is not at full capacity. She is four times more likely to catch COVID-19, and if she does, it is highly likely her immune system will struggle to fight it off. She will end up on a ventilator. Our county has less than 50 ventilators.

> **There’s more**

During her second round of radiation, the area they were targeting meant some overlap on her lungs. The upper part of one of her lungs has become slightly weaker after being exposed to the radiation. Not a good omen for a disease responsible for respiratory issues.

> **What can we do?**

Stay safe, stay alert, and stay cautious.

She can’t catch COVID-19.

—

Missed call from *mi madre*.

> **Call her back now**

> Wait until after dinner

You excuse yourself from your half-eaten quesadilla.

“Your father and I talked about it and we’re worried that the longer you stay on campus the more likely you are to be exposed. We’ve found you a flight home tomorrow at 2:00 pm.”

> **Accept**

> **Resist**

You had had some time to calm down and buy into the excited fever dream of free time on campus. You are worried about your exposure, yes, but you still feel invincible. 50 out of 7,000 seemed so small...

“Can I stay through the end of the week at least? There are some things I’d like to do.”

“We just want to keep the family safe; it would be better for you to come home sooner.”

- > **Accept**

- > Resist

Deep down, you know your parents are right.

“Ok Mom. Let me know the flight information.”

How do you feel?

- > Worried

- > **Conflicted**

- > Guilty

You know you need to be conscious and safe to protect your mom, and you are really worried about exposing her to something accidentally. But at the same time, everyone else seems so chill. All your friends were planning on how to fill their week, and their families weren’t making decisions on what to do until Thursday or Friday. Maybe it is selfish, but you feel like you might be overreacting.

Better safe than sorry?

Now that you have a definitive plan, you text your boyfriend to give him the update.

- > Serious

- > **Upbeat**

His spring break was next week, and you being home until the end of March means lots of time spent together. At this point you are a cocktail of mixed emotions, but hey, here was your silver lining. He seemed equally ready for more time together—going from a five hour drive time to thirty minutes would be amazing.

- > **Return to dinner**

Being home wouldn’t be so bad. It would all be fine.

It is 10:00 pm, and you have 16 hours until your flight.

- > Pack

- > Sleep

- > Finish your astronomy homework

- > **Make bagels**

You and some of your friends decide to make bagels as a celebration for classes being cancelled. You walk back to Commons to get some more comfortable clothes and an extra Dr. Pepper you have in your fridge.

- > **Walk with your friend to his room**
- > Split up

The group of the four of you decide to stay together; no one was in a rush that night. When you walk off the Stambaugh elevator, someone immediately greets your friend.

“Hey man, did you hear the guy at the end of the hall is getting tested for the virus tomorrow morning? One of his fraternity brothers he was hanging out with got exposed.”

Four degrees of separation away... 50 out of 7,000 suddenly doesn't seem so small.

No one is invincible.

Your flight lands 18 hours later and you finally make it home. It is easy to agree to stay inside just in case; you don't think you were exposed but better safe than sorry.

Another email notification.

- > Leave it until later
- > **Open it now**

“Dear Vanderbilt community...a VUMC health care worker has tested positive...we will move fully to online...the remainder of the semester...all students... move out by March 15...”

You tell your parents. What now? All of the stuff you left behind, that you couldn't pack in one suitcase...

- > Go back that weekend
- > Wait until your younger sister's spring break
- > **Wait for further notice**

Your mom was ready to drive back that weekend to load up the car, concerned about what would happen if you didn't move out then. Dad is the voice of reason, of paranoia; he is more worried about her than your unessential items.

“Dear, you don't know what you'll get exposed to. It's better just to wait a few weeks until the virus dies down.”

Next day, new email. No one can return to campus if they've already left. Your unneeded items (shoes, blankets, jackets, jewelry, pictures hanging on the wall...) will just have to wait.

Save game?

- > **Yes**
- > No

Exit game?

- > **Yes**

> No

Error: Command not recognized. Please try again later.

> **Adventure update from last log-in**

Your boyfriend's classes have been moved online. He was in isolation for two weeks before you were allowed to visit. What if he had been exposed unknowingly on his campus? All local schools are online until further notice. Everyone is back home: Mom, Dad, younger sister, and you. County-wide state of emergency until April 15th. No, sorry, make that April 30th.

How are you feeling?

> Worried

> **Busy**

> Relaxed

Your school assignments seemed to be piling up, and with all your energy focused on them there was no other space for worried thoughts. There was nothing more you could do anyway; you hadn't left the house since you arrived home from Vanderbilt. You weren't alone though. Your mom hadn't left the house either.

Your parents have declared a "closed boundaries" approach to the quarantine. No one leaves and nothing comes in without a level of precaution and protection.

Rule 1

> **Go to the grocery store**

> Order food and grocery delivery

You could never know who would be touching any food or groceries and their level of hygiene. It was easier for Dad to don an N95 mask he had from insulation work and go early in the morning every two weeks to stock up the refrigerator.

Rule 2

> Unpack the car immediately

> **Leave food for at least a day**

Coronavirus could live on cardboard for up to a day, which meant everything from the outside world waited at least a day or two in the garage. Mail, packages, groceries... everything had to wait. Refrigerated items had to be wiped down.

Rule 3

> **Walking freely outdoors is okay**

> Wear a mask every time you leave the house

As long as you are six feet away from the neighbors, the neighborhood streets were safe for you. This was the biggest blessing of quarantine; without the sunshine, you know it would so much harder for you to stay home.

The first time it happened you thought you could blame your classes. Maybe it was just poor time management. It was a stressful day and you had worked so hard, but it was 11:00 pm and you had a Spanish essay due in 12 hours that hadn't been started. You felt...

- > **Apathetic**
- > Sad

You leave your Spanish book spread out in front of you. Staring off into space, you were not motivated to complete your assignment. You were tired.

- > Start on your essay
- > Go to bed
- > **Stay up**

You might have been tired, but you didn't want sleep. If anything, you wanted to shoot yourself in the foot. Why not? You didn't care. Sitting there, thinking, missing your boyfriend, missing your friends, and feeling buried and isolated in your schoolwork, it hit you. You were...

- > Frustrated
- > Trapped
- > **Lonely**
- > Miserable

You were so, so lonely. You hadn't seen your boyfriend in a few weeks. Your friend group from campus was the type to meet in-person and hang out; nobody did Facetime. You didn't keep in close touch with high school friends, and most of those conversations probably wouldn't go further than a variety of those same four feelings. Frustrated, trapped, lonely, miserable.

- > **Cry**
- > Go to bed
- > Get something to eat

It was hard because you knew you had to stay home to keep your family safe. Your social life was a small price to pay for your mom's life. In that moment though, the world just felt so unfair. How could these be the choices you were forced to make? A month ago, everything was normal and full of hope and happiness, and now there was no choice but to turn to loneliness and isolation as the lesser of two evils.

Your mom had said once she felt guilty for her medical history; without it COVID-19 wouldn't make our family have to follow such strict policies. You never blamed her. For the most part, all you wanted was to keep her safe no matter the cost.

But in that moment?

You wanted nothing more than to just visit your boyfriend.

The two weeks are up, and your boyfriend is officially COVID-19 free. He texts you that morning, asking when you wanted to get together.

- > “Immediately!”
- > “Tomorrow?”
- > **Talk to the parents first...**

When they both have a moment, you sit down and begin to present your case.

- > “I miss him so much please...”
- > **“He’s out of isolation and should be safe.”**

You’re trying to stay calm and rational and approach this like the adult you are. Your heart feels like it is going to beat out of your chest. You’re holding in each breath.

“What would your plans be with him?”

- > **“Just hanging out at his house once my homework is done.”**
- > “Working together on online school.”
- > “We would just drive around, idk...”

“We need to talk about this a little more. Give us some more time.”

Ok. You wait. And wait. A day and a half later, you’re trying to appear normal and upbeat, but you’re worried. Their verdict is like an elephant in the room.

“Your Dad and I talked about it and we feel like...”

- > **“We still don’t know where his family has been, if they’ve been safe with deliveries.”**

“And...”

- > **“The county is on lockdown so you visiting would be a violation of that.”**

“It’s alright...”

- > **“Your dad and I communicated over letter for the first summer of our relationship, think of this as practice”**

Real helpful, Mom.

Retreat upstairs. Wrap yourself in a blanket.

- > **Cry**
- > Text your boyfriend

You can’t handle his disappointment and frustration right now as well. Yours is enough.

It’s been a few hours. How do you feel?

- > Frustrated
- > Sad

- > **Guilty**
- > Lonely

You want to scream that it's unfair, that his house and his family are safe, that you just want to see him once, but you know your parents are right. For a moment you just feel sick with shame. How dare you be so selfish? You know your mom is immunocompromised, is in danger, is a high-risk individual. Your family is just trying to keep her safe.

A visit with your boyfriend isn't worth her life.

The incidents happen two, three more times.

- > Complete your schoolwork
- > **Call your boyfriend**
- > Go to bed

You miss him so, so much, and he's not great at communication when you aren't seeing each other in person.

"Babe, I'm so lonely."

He gets it. He's sympathetic. He shoots down any hope you're clinging to of seeing him any time soon.

"If you want to keep your mom safe, looking at the projections, we probably won't be able to visit until August."

- > **Cry**

You almost had no choice; the tears appear so suddenly. You try to do it quietly; you know he's just trying to be realistic. He does not mean to harm you, he's struggling just as much as you are. You're just so *frustrated*.

The first time you get to leave the house in six weeks is at the end of April. You have to go pick up some prescriptions at the pharmacy drive thru. Not a glamorous errand, but so, so welcome.

- > **Take gloves**
- > Take a mask
- > Take hand sanitizer

You take some gloves just in case you have to sign for the medicine; who knows who has touched that pen. They weren't necessary in the end but better safe than sorry.

- > Drive straight home
- > **Drive around for a little**

It is sunny and you are driving again...you want that feeling to last. You drive through every back way you know, stretching out the return home.

You just feel so normal.

Save game?

> **Yes**

> No

Exit game?

> **Yes**

> No

Error: Command not recognized. Please try again later.

> Adventure update from last log-in

You have made it to the end of the semester, and you have no idea where things will go from here. You still haven't seen anyone, not even your grandparents, not even your boyfriend. But that's not what is important.

Your mom is safe. Your family is healthy.

It may not be a smooth road, but it will all be okay.