

## Life Extension

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Translated from Cebuano by John Bengan

*"I know the routine, put another nickel/ In the machine/ I feel kind of bad, can't you make the music*

*Easy and sad..."*——Frank Sinatra, "One for My Baby (And One More for the Road)"

Noy Romy had tried cobra's venom, the talisman of plantain, and lighting candles on the balete trees ahead of his house, which was perched on a cliff in Uling, Naga—but his blood pressure was still high and he was often groggy and felt like peeing, signs that the sweetness in his veins had soared again. Doc Patikul had said to him when he visited the health center last year: your blood sugar and pressure are topnotchers. Not even brewing lemongrass and holding garlic inside one's mouth could help. What, with him making soup from pork fat—fisting its lumpy bits and then tossing it onto steaming rice. Oh, every grain of white rice glistened, even more so his maw whenever he stuffed rice into his mouth with his hands. It would have been better if his wife Mila were still alive so that someone would tell him off. He wiped the glass cover of his wife's portrait with an old handkerchief, her hair almost faded, no more hints of her plump cheeks. Now that he was a widower, he lived alone in this small hut and toiled on his own.

Especially now in the time of a pandemic, what a hardship!

"Senior citizens will be arrested," he remembered the announcer on the radio saying. Senior citizens were forbidden to go out, they were barred from leaving their homes since they were more vulnerable to coronavirus infection, especially *he* who had a comorbid condition. "My, my, you old folks, just stay at home, you'll go no more a-roving!" said Bobby Kalungsod, a veteran broadcaster in Cebu.

Noy Romy got up from the bamboo bed. His shorts caught on the nail sticking out from the bed and he heard the rip in his buttocks. He felt an aching pain in his back that he hadn't told the doctor about. Consequently, almost all of his bones seemed to crack like a machine which had run out of grease that should have lubricated it.

He turned off the transistor radio to save on batteries. He didn't have anyone to send to the town center to buy him 9-volt Evereadys. To reach the town center, he would have to cross three barrios on his motorcycle, a waste of gasoline, not to

mention the fatigue of clutching the steering wheel coming down the potholed road near Barrio Cansamuroy and Tinakloban. If he missed, he'd be found swallowed up in the rush of a creek below. These days, he had to strive on his own after a nephew who lived close by had gotten married the previous year. The nephew had been the only one he could order around for errands. He had no one else nearby.

He pulled out the shelf of the small wardrobe over which he'd placed his wife's photograph. There were no medicines left in the tiny plastic packet, including the drug prescribed to him called Life Extension. The medicine gave him appetite, regular bowel movement, restful sleep. Probably it had been mixed with cobra's venom, since his veins seemed to turn outward and the muscles in his nape loosened.

He had not had Life Extension for almost three weeks and he felt that after one more week, his nape would tighten again and his blood would harden. He turned on the radio, but it managed to stay on for just a second (*"And now the end is near..."*) and it went off again and no longer made a sound. He removed the batteries and laid them on the window for sunning. Hopefully these would still work, like the cat that wriggled out of the number 9, the battery should have nine lives when placed under the sun. It should have been the same for humans: when under the sun, years would be added to a lifetime, no need for Life Extension.

The last time he had filled up the motorcycle was in March, so it was a good thing he'd gone full tank. The lockdown started in April, when the cases rose after the Holy Week when people flocked to the markets to purchase ingredients for the sweet soup binignit. He checked his belt bag for his senior citizen's notebook and the prescriptions. The papers had been crumpled, and the pages of the notebook resembled the creases in his face. The doctor's handwriting was nearly unreadable. Life Extension wasn't on the prescription sheet, but he'd listened to the radio about the drug's efficacy, and he'd heard the same thing from neighbors his age.

It took about ten thrusts before his motorcycle started. He immediately stepped on the gas and the sound of the engine returned. "Hah! Like the owner, this one can still shuffle!" he said to himself before he raced down the road going to Cansamuroy and Tinakloban. He felt strong that day—good thing he could just pick some moringa leaves behind his house so that once in a while he could make himself some broth.

Indeed, it didn't take long for him to reach the rough area between the two barrios. He knew well where the large bumps were and he swerved around them. He missed three times, hitting a large rock, but he expertly regained balance and

came through without plunging into the creek below. “Ha!” he said, “This one’s still strong!”

When he reached the alley, his friend Katol, who drove a habal-habal motorcycle for a living, saw him and yelled out, “Noy Romy, what are you doing out here running around? You could get COVID! You’re an elderly, they will catch you for sure!”

“Ay, Dong Katol, who are you trying to scare?” and he pulled into the highway that led to Talisay City. Noy Romy was running on 80 kilometers without traffic. “Now this is a road—no competition!” he said. Since border control and lockdown began, public transportation had been halted. In less than half an hour, he could already see the boundary of Talisay. But then he was surprised to find a column of vehicles that seemed to have been stranded. He shifted to low gear when he saw that there was a checkpoint ahead, the row of vehicles on the side of the road. “Damn!” Noy Romy muttered to himself. He might get caught if he passed that way. He stepped on the gas once more, almost racing up to 120 in an instant, and when he approached the checkpoint, the policemen whistled and the sirens of their cars went off. Noy Romy ignored them, hurtling past the checkpoint, not thinking whether or not the police would give chase. He didn’t glance at the side mirrors as he sprinted down to his trusted pharmacy. The police sirens and whistles faded, and for sure, he wasn’t being pursued.

After some kilometers, he arrived at the Elixir Mall near Lagtang. The area where the pharmacy was seemed empty and quiet, and perhaps the police really didn’t come after him. He parked his motorcycle, and when he was about to walk into the pharmacy, a security guard barred him from entering. “Noy, you’re an elderly, why are you out here? Senior citizens are not allowed to go out!”

“Dong, I have nobody to run my errands for me and I just need to buy Life Extension,” he said to the guard.

“Just wait here,” said the guard, “I will ask, because it’s really not allowed, Noy.” The guard then asked a female salesperson in the pharmacy if they could wait on an elderly man.

“Nah,” the woman said, “not allowed, senior citizens aren’t supposed to go out. Why didn’t he ask someone else to do it for him?”

Noy Romy heard what the woman inside the pharmacy had said, and he replied, “Day, I have no one to send here. Just let me buy Life Extension because I ran out!”

“We can’t do that, Noy! It’s forbidden,” the woman said, the security guard then pushing the door shut and so Noy Romy fell on his back. Furious, the old man got up

and retrieved something from under the seat of his motorcycle. He went up to the security guard who was stunned at the sight of Noy Romy wielding an ice pick. He went straight to the counter and threatened the woman salesperson. "Hand over all the Life Extension you got!"

At that moment, the security guard was pointing his gun at Noy Romy. "Get out!" the guard shouted at him. "Call the police, Day!" he told the salesperson.

Noy Romy stepped out and drove away on his motorcycle. Instead of going back to Naga, he went into the Poblacion in Talisay, down to his favorite karaoke pub near the bay. But the place was deserted. Watering holes were shut down during the pandemic, especially karaoke pubs. The place was closed, but Inday Liza was sitting inside.

"Day Liza!"

"Uy, Noy! You're here."

"Just one glass of tuba, Day, and let me sing one song," Noy Romy requested.

"Aw, no problem, Noy. Just one time, right?"

"Just one time, Day Liza. Thank you so much."

"Come in, Noy. You're just in time because we have some tuba."

Inday Liza switched on the karaoke and fetched a five-peso coin to insert into the machine. She handed Noy Romy the songbook so her regular customer could select a song.

"Aw, no need for that, Day Liza," Noy Romy said. "Number 143, straight away."

"Still the same, Noy," said Inday Liza, smiling, "your favorite."

Inday Liza placed on the table a glass of toddy still frothing at the rim. She gave Noy Romy the microphone. Returning to the karaoke machine, she popped in the five-peso coin. She pressed the buttons for song number 143.

Noy Romy downed the tuba in one swig and put the empty glass on the table. He took the microphone and stood up as the karaoke started to play.

"*And now, the end is near...*" Noy Romy began to sing. He closed his eyes as though to relish the song, "*and so I face the final curtain...*"

The song was fifty years old and in 1974 Frank sang it at the Madison Square Garden, Noy Romy was thinking as he crooned, "*And so I face the final curtain...*" In truth, he wasn't a widower. For forty-six years he had been searching for Mila's whereabouts. She'd suddenly disappeared in 1974, the same year Frank Sinatra sang the song he was singing now in this lonely and secluded karaoke pub at Poblacion in Talisay.

"*...I traveled each, and every highway, and more, much more than this...*"

Suddenly, the sound of a siren rose above the noise of the karaoke machine. He paid no attention. He would finish the song for the only person who'd been steeped in his love. But several police cars arrived, armed officers in bulletproof vests and Kevlar helmets, their assault weapons poking out, came out of the vehicles. They all homed in on Noy Romy, from left, to right, they surrounded the pub, and Inday Liza now saying to him, "Noy Romy, please forgive me..."

Before Inday Liza could finish saying what she wanted to say to Noy Romy, the guns rattled off and riddled Noy Romy's body and head with bullets.

The line "*I did it my way...*" rang out just as the bullets perforated his being. Noy Romy fell on the ground, his mouth foaming as though the toddy he drank had spilled forth.

In the abrupt silence after the gunfire, a policeman took his radio and said, "Package delivered. Over."