



Abstract

“The Devil Bought Online” is about a character who gets laid off from work. Confined in a room of a boarding house he rents, his life in the pandemic leads him to detach himself from his family and friends, and he decides to buy a devil from an online marketplace to accompany him during his isolation.

Keywords

Layoff, steam inhalation, pandemic, online, devil

THE DEVIL BOUGHT ONLINE

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YOU RECEIVED ANOTHER notification, adding to the unpruned notifications you received since the company included you on the laid-off workers’ list due to the coronavirus. It took a few minutes before you forced yourself to read the incomplete text from the phone’s banner message: *Hatod will attempt to deliver your package today. If COD*—You didn’t finish the message. Your heart skipped a beat. The devil you ordered is coming.

Last June, you’ve heard about the layoff of hundreds of staff due to paring down the company’s operations. This job cut includes pilots, engineers, and cabin crews—where some of them are your close colleagues. Of course, you believed that they wouldn’t involve you in the list since you have performed so well during your training in Malaysia. You ignored this and focused on your supervisors’ words that applauded your congeniality and efforts during the side trips to various Hindu temples. In one temple your colleagues visited, you knelt and thanked another god whose name you cannot even pronounce or remember. As you went back to the hotel, you were finally convinced when you heard

them saying that you can excel as a customer service agent in the airline industry. But that night, when you were hooked by the recent news about congress that resolved to shut down the leading broadcasting network, an email came in. Your name, in all capital letters, had been included in the list. The first thing that came to your mind was what you will say to your parents. The second was that everyone is not irreplaceable. And you started to believe in the pandemic, which you first thought of as a conspiracy theory, the plandemic.

When the news had finally sunk in, misery, like your dirty laundry on your hamper accumulated and overflowed, led you to attempting to live a life without human interaction. A man is an island, you thought. You reached to the point where you consulted Reddit: *How long can you go without human interaction?* Four to six decades, from one of the users. You have also gone quite far on the internet too. You searched people who have survived without air, sunshine, food, or sleep. But, you knew you cannot be like Mahatma Gandhi, who fasted for three weeks—ordering *porksilog* never fails to tempt you. Of course, not even the Irish political prisoner, Terence MacSwiney, who held a 74-day hunger strike. But, this is what you have learned: a hunger strike is a form of protest.

With just the amount of canned goods and packs of noodles you have opened since the first day of the lockdown, you knew you failed protesting before starting it. So you thought of another form of protest, the deactivation of your social media account. The last time you had deactivated your Facebook was when you broke up with your ex-boyfriend two years ago—which you learned recently that he is one of those churchgoers contracted the virus from the church's holy water last month. And, after he recovered from the virus in three weeks, you also heard from your friend that he became an atheist and started binge-watching the *Ancient Alien* series, ordered a few books of Dan Brown, and attacked everyone on Facebook who does not believe the gravity of the pandemic.

You knew you were not alone in your protest. One of your friends, who worked in a private hospital, expressed the same sentiment and decided to deactivate her social media. That was the time when the city spent 2.5 million pesos for *tuob* kits, even if several medical groups from Cebu had already said that *tuob* or steam inhalation can't kill the virus.

You also expanded your avoidance by not answering calls from your family who lived in Malaybalay. But their insistence to contact you

irritates you most of the time. There was never a day your mother failed to call with her spiel, “Undong, komosta na intawon ka dira sa Cebu.” Although you knew she was the one who suggested that you live on your own and stop depending on them after high school, your phone would still ring, and if you won’t answer her calls, she would rain on you templated messages: *How are you? I always pray for you. Don’t forget to take you medicine.* After you read these messages, which you somehow memorized because of their frequency, you would imagine her tending her garden, touching the flowers, or whispering something to the leaves.

They’re fine selling rabbit’s meat anyway, you whispered to yourself as you chewed the uncooked beef loaf you scooped directly from its can. *This half-empty can of canned goods is what the capitalist system brought us,* you thought after you had finished the third can of a beef loaf. *We have been living thoughtlessly,* you continued musing. *Normalizing cheap food is already a form of privilege that we can stuff and mend our hungry stomachs every day.* You stopped after realizing that your random musing won’t bring you back to your job. What you have lost even haunted you in your sleep. You would wake up late and nightmares about faceless creatures leaving the airport, maintaining physical distancing.

When the Hatod app went on sale before they had finally stopped accepting orders due to quarantine, you had to make up your mind. Finally, you checked the devil out that you added to your cart.

LOOKING AT THE ROOM you rented in Sitio Zapatera, you knew you had miserably failed to live the off-grid life you have expected. In the kitchen-cum-living room, a thick layer of dust has accumulated on the top of the TV. The cigarette butts on the floor were like gun shells from an ongoing war, and the dirty dishes piled like Jenga blocks in the sink. On your small table, the chicken bones and scraps from your meal days ago already have mold in their left-open Styrofoam container. The accumulated empty cans of sardines and packs of noodles provided by the local government overflowed from the bin.

When the government’s aid had stopped, you woke up in the middle of the night with an ulcer that forced you to retreat into the kitchen and take medicine. The bookshelf? It now looked like a mouth with missing teeth. Books of Sagan, Hawking, and Harari were on the floor slowly replacing the worn-out, muddy floor rags. Marie Kondo’s *The Life-changing Magic of Tidying Up* was under the mountain of dirty laundry. Beneath that,

ripped and holed underwear which you also used as a cum rag, you knew it was from the judging eye of the dragon from your Tolkien book, which you failed to finish together with other books you have bought from a Malaysian book fair which frequently toured the country.

Your phone rang. Unknown caller. You lazily answered, *Yes, Kuya*. And you threw him with a monotonous *Sige, okay, yes, okay, sige, yes*. You opened your jalousie window and peeked at the life outside: neighbors, who have become strangers to their own place, wore fabric face masks in different colors while passing the narrow street. Do people feel invincible while wearing their mask on?

Your eyes followed them as they approached the checkpoint, probably, begging those men with guns. After a while, they were carrying plastic bags of rice and canned goods. Children were prohibited from going and playing outside. Their laughter had been swallowed by fear and confusion. Eyes were peeking at the military vehicle and tank outside to every window that you can see. When tomorrow comes, people will be reminded by face masks of how close we were to the abyss. They will be reminded, you thought, that the border between dying and forced confinement is thin.

On someone else's balcony, your neighbor Mario, who left his glaucoma untreated, went to his balcony. He used to work at a blind massage service inside the mall before lockdown. You saw him reposition his favorite monobloc chair, the one he used for his customers before he sat on it. Perhaps, you knew that he also understood the weight of the world by the time his job ended. Sometimes you thought that he miserably missed working when you caught him wearing the green-colored uniform he used to wear at work and pressing his forearm.

How long can we endure living in the belly of the beast?

A house, just a few blocks away, was visited by the nurses and doctors wearing colorful protective clothing like a failed proposed costume for the remake of a low-budget Teletubbies. You saw someone put a yellow caution tape around it like there was a crime scene.

As you stared at the yellow caution tape clumsily tied on a tree by one of the volunteers from the *barangay*, you thought another wall had been built. What do you know about walls? It separates people. You remembered your new neighbor who built tall white walls, towering white gates, surrounding their big white house. There you learned that rich people got tall gates and tall fences. At school, you learned more about

walls: it is either to keep people inside or to keep people out. Whether a tape or a make-shift barricade with a placard hanging that reads “Only residents are allowed to enter,” you know it is the modern prison wall and the Great Wall.

Sitio Zapatera used to be filled with the nonchalant noise from the karaoke singers belting Aegis or Michael Learns to Rock, clicking sounds of the mahjong tiles being shuffled and stacked, mewling of pregnant stray cats with conjunctivitis, on the roof, and boisterous laughter from drunk men in front of the *sari-sari* store, or men in the other room smoking pot. Now, the only sound that tore the silence was the siren of an ambulance passing through the *sitio* now and then. Then, you would whisper: *Ay, gi-COVID. They must be dying.*

Every time you slipped into a pajama and walked—with your dick swinging, rubbing against and in between the thin pajama cloth and unshaved balls—toward the balcony with a lit stick of Marlboro red in between your fingers, you would witness the intermittent silence—where not even kettle whistles or a persistent dry cough from downstairs are heard.

When silence revisits, you’ll remember your workplace: the forty-five-minute interval of the whirring of airplanes, the festivity of every arrival, the silence of passengers patiently waiting for their luggage at the terminal, the shapes, colors, sizes, and *weight* of what these strangers carry, and the constant movement of coming in and leaving. This is what you wanted: a never-failing gentle reminder of what it means to be alive. And when this silence hit you hard, you gave a sad chuckle of how a glorious planet, with glorious history, knelt to a virion with approximately fifty to two hundred nanometers in diameter.

AY, GIATAY! YOU SCAMPERED like a rat after realizing that you do not have much left in your worn-out purse. Few one hundred peso bills and twenty-five cents will not be enough to pay for the delivery.

You rummaged your backpack for bills but found only old bus tickets, cinema receipts, grocery list, torn cock rings, incomplete stamps for a 2020 journal, and empty blister packs of Ibuprofen. You blamed it again on your workplace that put you on the list. In a few minutes, you knew that your phone would ring coming from the courier, so you hurriedly ran toward the laundry basket. The hunt for coins and bills in the pocket began. You pulled out the pockets of your blue jeans, and you found

nothing. In your shorts? Just a peso coin. Every time you pulled out an empty pocket, you could not stop yourself but to wince, and every wince turned out to be some Morse code saying: *I ordered this to save myself*. You needed to add it to the cart.

It took nearly half an hour until you finally found a five hundred peso bill inserted in one of the pages of Lowry's book, *Broke Millennial*. As you folded the money, you gave a rueful sigh.

You could finally hear the sound of a motorcycle, the roaring sound of a motorcycle revving as it entered the narrow street intrudes like profanity in the almost peaceful neighborhood. This always gives you an unpleasant feeling.

You heard this similar sound before. A sound from a deep motorcycle muffler near your boarding house a few years ago. You saw two men riding a motorcycle and started gunning down a stranger. No one knows him in the area, and all they knew is he wore a red and blue baller with words in capital letters *tapang at malasakit*. When the sun rose, the voice of Ruphil Bañoc echoed from your landlady's radio. You heard him say the word *tokhang* several times like it was a response from an unanswered litany.

The courier finally came. He handed you a box, similar to the size of a large carton of coffee that sweaty young men would usually carry at the back of the shopping mall you used to pass by. It was not heavy. Before you decided to open it, you grabbed the spray bottle with alcohol inside. "It must be 70 percent isopropyl." The very words that you heard from the neighbor's TV. Then disinfected the box.

You decided to shake the it. No sound. Enough to make you freeze and give a puzzled look on your face. Yet hurriedly opened it, you thought of preparing to get your phone and requested a replacement or filed a complaint in case the delivered the wrong item. Just one more tape. One more tape. Then, you tore it open. The devil you ordered was not there.

YOU HAD NOT TOUCHED your phone. You have not touched anything after clearing the clutter on your table to place the box. A blank stare. You must be thinking of having missed something before you added it to the cart and instantly checked it out. Since it was a 4.4 sale period, the devil only cost you 999, including the shipping fee. Another bogus seller? You recalled that you had a heated discussion with a seller when you ordered Epsom salt for your infected ingrown nail on your toe, but then you received a

pouch of white sugar. You stood and studied the box once more. There was no hidden trap door in it. It was just an empty box.

When the sun settled down, and the neighborhood went quiet, you heard another siren from an ambulance. *Death, again*, you thought as you blankly stared at the empty box. Maybe that's what others thought too. A siren is a Siren's song of death for sad sailors. Silence has finally lingered longer than before.

Knowing Sitio Zapatera in Cebu as a wonted place of all sorts of celebrations where residents celebrate like nobody's business, the place's silence gave an eerie feeling. You compared it to the time you saw Colon Street, which turned into a deserted place during the first few months of the enhanced community quarantine.

When the clock struck nine, the box gently shook. *Fuck!* You were not imagining things. You knew what slowly crawled out inside the box. The bony red fingers with their long dark nails came out like leeches. You hurriedly stood and stepped back while your eyes were still fixed at the creature coming out of it. Then, its hands and hairy arms followed until the devil's entire body finally crawled out of it. Its ribs were visible as though it had not eaten for months, but the devil's six breasts, like pigs', were full and raised, and infected with numerous large warts dangling like large ticks on the dog's neck. The devil's skin was burnt red like pig roast that went wrong. When your eyes have finally adjusted from the dark, you could finally see the devil's face: it's just like yours.

NO ONE ASKED WHEN someone saw the devil you bought while both of you stayed in the balcony sharing the cigarette's smoke. You were so ready to tell them that you grew up fascinated with the devils. You owe that to your mother. Although there are things that your mother couldn't explain, she is fluent with finding devils. There are devils everywhere, she shared as she prepared the *tinola* for dinner. On the tip of a knife, there's a devil. In the barrel of your father's gun, which was carefully hidden under their bed, there lives a devil. On your tongue, a devil lurks. In your heart, the devil sleeps. But when you asked her about God, she ignored you and continued to stir the *tinola*.

It was not difficult for you to deal with the devil. Both of you shared the same taste of food and music to listen to. The devil did not complain even if you play Joni Mitchell's *Both Sides Now* or *River* (even if it's not yet Christmas) and anything from Eraserheads. Whenever you ordered

food online, the devil would pick similar food. There are times when the devil prefers to suck its nipples to drink its milk until it becomes saggy. And when the devil is full, it will crawl toward the corner and lick its crotch like a cat. That's the time you love the words "self-sufficient and sustainable."

The devil does not speak; it only cackles, chuckles, groans, and moans. Every night, you did not fail to make another cup of tea for the devil. Both of you sat on the balcony or by the window, stared at it as the world slept without closing its eyes, or woke up without even sleeping. When you talked about how you hated your former workplace for including you in the list, the devil shed tears. When you narrated about the shooting incident near your place, the devil clenched his fist while its nipples hardened. When you complained about your nightmares, about monsters dipping their face masks into a tub of kerosene, the devil laughed so loud that the dogs nearby would howl and bark. When you told him that you missed your mother, but you distanced yourself from her and your entire family, the devil handed over your phone. Yet, you refused; telling the devil that you are *doing fine*, as you stared at the room that seemed filled with your bones.

The devil was everything you could ask for. Your satisfaction led you back to the seller's page, rated five stars plus review, and attached photos of the devil washing the dishes and doing the laundry with you. You also included in your review that the devil reads Carl Sagan and Cormac McCarthy that the devil picked on the floor, and at night, the devil chose the Bible. When you saw the devil underlined a verse from Thessalonians, you knew it was the devil's favorite: *reject every kind of evil*. When you need a private time to gratify yourself as you watch gay porn found on Twitter, the devil left because you knew it respects your privacy (Of course, you did not mention this in your review.). The app gave you 0.5 points of coins.

But the devil would always cough. Whether it walked or lazily crawled, it stopped to wheeze and catch its breath. You sent a message to the seller, but you did not receive any reply even if you knew the seller was always online.

Oregano or *lagundi*. Those are the herbs that your mother used to boil when you got a cough, right after she will scold you for playing under the rain or sleeping late at night polishing your marbles, and counting your *pogs* again and again. But in a city where the ground is covered with cement, and it is a city where there are more buildings and houses than plants, you did not have to exert an effort and waste your time to look for it.

You got nothing else to believe in but the governor of the province's suggestion of inhalation of steam. Of course, you did not tell your friend about this. When you heard that the Capitol's employees were suggested to get steam therapy twice a day, you allow the devil to do it three times. After a few days, the devil coughed its lungs out. The pieces of its lungs were on the floor, and you hurriedly picked it and placed it on the container. That night, when you were asleep, the devil ate its own lungs. When you woke up, you did not hear the devil cough.

YOU FINALLY GOT IRRITATED when the devil pointed at your phone.

No, you said. I do not want to answer.

But the devil kept groaning, grunting, and making a sound like a tongueless creature. *I said no.* Then you stormed into your room and locked the door. You slumped your face on the pillow. You forced yourself to sleep, but you couldn't. The phone continued to ring. The same messages came in for hours: *How are you?*

You began to weep, and you did not know why. Your favorite song was playing in the living room. It was the song that you always hear every Sunday morning while your mother was on her rusty outdoor Lazy Boy chair. It was the same chair that your father used to sit in. He bought it in the city with his hard-earned money. You knew life is difficult when simply buying a chair would need sweat.

You heard her say, *you know, some birds cannot fly, and some . . . never return.* Then you would see her fan herself, and whistle to call the wind. You ignored her as you continued to spread the muscovado sugar on top of the warm *puto maya*.

The devil was seated on the stool with his legs crossed when you decided to go out of your room. He was sipping tea. Chamomile. Your favorite. The devil squeezed its nipple and squirted milk into the tea. As the music continued to play on repeat, you noticed something else. The books were on their shelves now, and the windows have been cladded with white curtains. The dishes on the kitchen sink were already washed, and the floor had been mopped. It seemed that time had gone back to the moment you first entered the room.

The phone rang again. *No, you told yourself.* But the devil grabbed the phone and handed it over to you. The name that would never become foreign to you, flashed on the screen. The devil grunted. It took a minute before you took it from the devil. But the phone stopped ringing.

You saw the devil ambling closer to the table where the box had been placed. Where are you going? You asked the devil without expecting any response. You showed no resistance, and instead you thought of the devil as an online product that is about to reach its expiration.

You saw the devil place his leg inside the box and then his other leg. When half of the devil's body was already inside it, the devil slowly sank into it until you could no longer see its head.

AT DAWN, YOU WAKE up in your bed, panting. You gently wiped the beads of cold sweat on your forehead with your trembling fingers. You cleared your eyes while you heard another siren from the ambulance which tore the silence. Now, you whispered: *Someone is fighting for his life*

As you went out to the balcony, you did not bother to check the Marlboro red pack which has been empty for months already. Outside, the streets were already free from the men in uniform and their useless tanks. For the first time in a long time, your neighbor tested their microphone, and the faint laughter of children could be heard. The upbeat karaoke instrumental of Gloria Gaynor's song made the entire boarding house throb from the karaoke reverb and almost swallowed a recent report on the radio, but you heard the reporter talking about the vaccine and its 95 percent efficacy.

Your phone rang. A known caller. You thought about the devil and finally swiped the accept button. You stuttered, but your tender utterance of her name made the difference.