

Yesterday, Today, Tomorrow *by Kim Dyna*

Translated by Lim Ketya

“Hello, dear sisters and customers. If you love it, please drop your phone number and address in the comment section. This lotion has unbelievable advantages. It whitens and brightens your skin from the inside of your body within three days,” said an online lotion seller, who was advertising her products on a Facebook page. I immediately dropped my phone number and address in the comment section, then I scrolled down to have a look at clothing pages. There were tons of fashionable clothes that caught my eyes, and I decided to buy some of them since I have to go on a trip with my friends this Sunday.

Oh! I forgot to introduce myself. My name is Mealea. I am 28 years old and I am working as a customer service manager at a private company. My family consists of four members; my father, mother, older brother, and I. Since my brother and I are very busy with our work, we rarely eat with our parents, especially dinner. We usually go out with friends or colleagues. It seems like our parents are living on their own as if they don't have any children. We are hardly around and spend time with them. Keep, Kampot, Kirirom and newly opened restaurants are my second home for the weekends. I am physically and mentally tired of working on weekdays. Therefore, in order to motivate myself to work, I have to reward myself by spending time with my friends, enjoying delicious and gourmet food with them.

At a beach resort in Kep, I was happily taking photos with my friends under the clear blue sky, with beautiful makeup and new clothes on that enhance my beauty. After taking photos, we returned to the room to sit down and relax. After a while, the waiter brought us food such as boiled prawn, fried crab with green pepper, prawn tom yum soup and grilled squid. As soon as dishes were served, some of us served the rice and others reached for squids and crabs to fill our mouth deliciously. My friend, Sophea and I poured Koh Kong spicy sauce into small bowls to dip with prawns because we found that the sauce bowls that waiter had brought were not enough for us. We were too lazy to call the waiter. We greatly enjoyed our lunch. After lunch, there was a vendor selling durian on motorcycle. We asked her to stop and bought some durians from her. “Kampot durian is so delicious!” said Sokha, who is my male friend since university. He could not finish the durian, half of it still remained. Narin, who saw that said,

“Sokha, are you done with that?”

“Yes, I’m done! I ate too much, and I’m going to throw up!”

“Eh, you took only one big piece.”

“Do you feel it’s a waste? You can eat them if you want!”

“I don’t want to waste it, and you don’t seem full at all!”

While replying to Sokha, Narin grabbed the durian and ate without any hesitation. As the four of us have been close friends since our school day, we would always share food when we have something to eat, and we never get disgusted from eating each other’s leftovers. Why would it be disgusting when none of us has any disease? We are not afraid of infection. Ha-ha! Our trip ended happily with unforgettable memories. We were planning on going abroad together in the following year. Oh, just thinking about it makes me feel so excited already! Travelling abroad, eating delicious food, and buying brand new stuff! How many times can we do such things in our life? I’ve worked myself to death. Why should I worry about my life every day and be thrifty just to give myself happiness? We should have a meaningful life!

I got home at around 10 p.m. Upon my arrival, I rushed to get a bottle of water from the fridge and thirstily drank it because on the way home, I did not dare to drink much water as I did not want to stop for the restroom. I drank half bottle of water, and before I was about to put it back in the fridge, my older brother, Chetra came out of the bathroom and said,

“Don’t put it back yet, let me drink first!”

I handed the bottle to Chetra and asked,

“You came back home so early today.”

Chetra finished drinking water. And he replied,

“I had a stomachache today. I couldn’t drink with my friends for too long.”

“Ah! That’s why you came home so early!”

“And you, did you go out for a long time?”

“Oh, I drive slowly at night, because I am afraid of accidents!”

“It’s good to be cautious. OK, I am going to bed now!”

“How are Mom and Dad? Are they already in bed?”

“They went into their room at 8:30 p.m.!”

After responding to my questions, Chetra went back to his room and I went back to my room. As I entered my room, I laid down on the mattress immediately without taking a shower because I was too tired! I took out my phone from my bag to check the photos I took in the afternoon and posted them on Facebook as usual.

The next day, my colleague and I went to eat at nearby restaurant after the meeting in the office. There were five people at our table, which was a little packed, but we liked to eat together as we could talk and shared the dishes. Five people, five dishes! I felt like I was having a buffet! Heh, heh. Although we were having a chit-chat, we were holding phones in our hands. Then, I got shocked when I saw the news about the outbreak of COVID-19 in Wuhan city in China. Dalin, my co-worker said,

“Don’t worry too much. It is too far from us. It should be fine!”

“You are right! Don’t think too much. Worrying too much can be stressful and make you sick!” Sophy responded to Dalin. Nodding in assent, I swiped the news and put my phone on the table and said,

“By the way, let’s go see a movie tomorrow! There’s a new movie!”

“You said you wanted to buy clothes that were 50% on sale,” Sophy replied.

“Let’s go see a movie first, then go buy clothes!” Dalin suggested.

“OK!” The two other friends agreed.

Next day, I got up at 10 a.m. in the morning because it’s Saturday. I was ready to go downstairs to see my mom cooking. As soon as she saw me, she said,

“Hey ! Where are you going? Don’t you eat first? I made plenty of food today!”

“I am going out with my friends. Today I don’t eat at home, Mom!”

“Hmm, you always eat out. You don’t have enough nutrients in your body!”

“Mom, you keep picking on me. What about brother?”

“Yes, sure. Both of you are the same!”

I laughed and walked toward my mom and hugged her.

“Tomorrow, I will have meal with you at home, Mom!”

I hurriedly left home as I was afraid that she might keep nagging.

I used to live happily before the COVID-19 outbreak in Phnom Penh. But then, everything changed. I had to change work shift for my company. I worked two days at home and three days in the office because the company limited the number of employees in the office to prevent the spread of COVID-19. I had to wear mask, wash my hands regularly and keep a social distancing. I went out only with Dalin at lunch time because the other three friends worked from home. When I ate with Dalin, we had separate spoons for separate dishes and we sprayed alcohol-based sanitizer onto the table, the chair and our hands for safety. We had never taken such precautions! If we neglect them, we face the risk of getting infected!

In the evening, I would leave the office and go home directly. I did not dare to catch up with high school friends and colleagues as I used to do. They were scared of being infected and so was I. I sometimes would buy food to go or ordered food home from delivery apps. I had more time to spend and eat dinner with my parents. I just realized that my parents were very old! Did I not notice it before or did I not have time for them? My parents seemed happier when I could join them for dinner. Yet, my mom would still complain about Chetra and said,

“Chetra is still drinking late at night. I worry that one day he might bring COVID-19 home.”

“You’re right. Both of us are old and have some chronic diseases. If he gets infected, there is little hope.”

Hearing my parents saying, I felt sorry for them for having to worry about their own health every day because Chetra still had not given up his drinking habit at night. And I tried to reassure them,

“Don’t worry, Mom and Dad! Just take care of your health, eat nutritious food and keep your mental health. I’ll try talking to brother Chetra!”

“He’ll get married soon, but he hasn’t changed his behavior and still hangs out with friends all night!” My mom said with concerns.

I was also anxious because Chetra’s behavior made us worried that he might get COVID-19 since he goes out and drinks a lot. My whole family is not safe since he doesn’t care about the family at all. Gathering is fun but if something happens; my parents are the most vulnerable members! COVID-19 doesn’t choose people. It cannot find a way to us unless we ourselves go toward it!

I took a deep breath as soon as I entered my room. Then I slowly laid on my mattress, took out my phone and scroll up and down the screen. I was no longer interested in

cream, lotion, clothes, and recreation. I was looking for any updated news on COVID-19 from the Ministry of Health and the Government. Vaccination is important measures, but the most important thing is to practice three dos and three don'ts. It depends on the participation of responsible citizens! What if we, like my brother, go out for drinking, meet friends and don't care about the situation? Are there any teachers who could teach him that it is more important than a glass of wine? I unfollowed fashion and beauty pages, which I used to spend lots of money on. I started following pages that sell organic fruits and vegetable. I just realized that staying healthy was the most important thing in life, and we could be healthy by eating nutritious food. Oh! I forgot to tell about one thing. Due to the impacts of COVID-19 on my company, I had a pay cut by 40%. I did not let my parents know this because I was afraid that they might feel depressed. I had to spend some of my savings which I had saved for going abroad once the situation got better. Luckily, I had not decided to buy a house with installment, so I didn't have to worry about being in debt. COVID-19 has repeatedly mutated into new variants and it doesn't care who you are. If you are careless or neglectful, you would face a high risk of getting infected!

People around the world including my family must adapt to a new normal life, or in short, we have to live with COVID-19 though we are fully vaccinated. Even for my brother, whose wedding ceremony is next month, due to the deadly serious outbreak, the elderly from both sides decided to make a smaller betrothal ceremony, in which the couple must seek approval from ancestors of both families and sign a marriage certificate. They promised to hold a big ceremony when everything is back to normal. Chetra looked happy because he did not have to spend a huge amount of money on the wedding. However, my sister in law was deeply disappointed about that decision since she couldn't have a wedding ceremony where she can get dressed gorgeously, which is the most important thing for every woman in their lives. But she had no choice. The tradition and custom could not avoid the change caused by COVID-19. If we don't adapt ourselves, we face infection! COVID-19 adapts to nothing. It fears nothing and nobody!

Though the betrothal ceremony was coming soon, my brother still went out for drinking all night long! I pitted my future sister-in-law, but I couldn't help! If she loves him, she must accept his flaws! If I were her, I would never accept a husband or boyfriend like my brother who does not care about his family.

A few days later, my brother started to have a common cold symptoms, such as sore throat. He quickly did a rapid test for COVID-19 by himself and found out he was positive. He had another PCR test just to be sure! The result confirmed that he tested

positive for COVID-19. What I was worried came true! All of my family members had to do a test. Luckily, we tested negative in the first test. And we were half happy and half worried because we had to take the second test and be in quarantine for 14 days to make sure that we had not been infected by my brother. I desperately worried about my parents' health. I tried to comfort them and cooked in the most hygienic way for them. As we lived in the same house, I would wear masks when I went downstairs or cooked. Fortunately, we could order foods from food delivery apps. Sometimes there was a mobile vegetable and meat vendor selling in the area that we were living in. I would yell out loud what I needed then they put those on a chair in front of my house. I would also place my money on the chair. Everything was sprayed by alcohol-based sanitizer before brought in and out of the house. Sometimes, there was no vegetable my parents wanted. We asked the neighbor to buy the vegetable from the market. My neighbors were good and they didn't discriminate my family who had a COVID-19 patient. They were willing to help us buy things we needed! There is nothing greater than having supporters when we are in difficulties. I feel warm and will always remember all their good deeds. I wish they can be away from COVID-19; if they couldn't, then I would be willing to help them! Since COVID-19 is vicious, people should be encouraged to help each other!

Time flew, here came the second test, and the result was negative which made us happy. My brother, who was receiving treatment in a hospital, was also delighted to hear that! I expected my brother could be more considerate to the family when he came home. He should stop drinking not to bring COVID-19 home again.

After the quarantine, I had to go back to work following work schedule prepared by the company. My brother's case made me more cautious. I would start getting up in the morning to make breakfast for my family and bring food to my office because I wouldn't dare to eat out like before. When I have to, I eat with fears of being infected. If I had been like this from the beginning, I could have saved a lot of money! He, he! But there was no COVID-19 back then. Being overly cautious, I even brought two liters of water from home because there was only one water purifier at work which was used by too many staff. Even when using bathroom, I sprayed alcohol-based sanitizer onto the flush button and the seat cover before and after using to prevent infection and transmission to the next person. I didn't want him or her to face risks when he or she forgot to spray alcohol based sanitizer. "No one is safe until everyone is safe" is the quote I've had in mind in order to suppress my selfishness in the pandemic. The meeting hall used to accommodate more than ten people, but it has been cut down to four, and the rest would join the meeting via Zoom. We also had many challenges during the meeting such as slow speed of internet and connection cut-off. We sometimes could not hear well because of weak signal, but we had no choice. High-

performance employee working in the COVID-19 pandemic does not only mean the person who can keep the deadline, but also the person who can fulfill the social duties by wearing mask and maintaining physical distancing. Everyone has a family! Everyone loves his or her family! So everyone must take precautions!

When I got home, I would spray sanitizer to my shoes and clothes. I would rush into my room to take off my clothes and soaked them in detergent and waited for 15 to 30 minutes before I took a shower. There were two bathrooms in my house: one in my parents' room and the other one downstairs. I shared the downstairs bathroom with my brother, so I would usually spray the sanitizer on my hands before using the doorknob and faucet. I used sanitizer on toilet before and after using it. I had my own bath products such as body wash, shampoo, hand soap, face cleansing foam, and water dipper. These measures could protect me from the infection. I dare not eat meal with Mom and Dad because I would always go out to work and meet people. As cautious as I had been, I was worried that I might accidentally get infected. To make sure that my mom and dad were safe, I used my own dishes and spoons and even separated dishwashing liquid and sponge. Hmm...! Before, our family had enough time to get together, but we did not do it. Now we wanted to do family gatherings, but the situation would not allow.

I kept trying these new habits and eventually got used to them. However, there was one thing that I found difficult to get used to. It was boredom! I wanted to hang out! I wanted to go out for fresh and cold breeze! Unable to hold this feeling, I once suggested to my friends to go for a picnic with homemade food. If we were careful enough, that trip would be possible and safe, we thought. My friends, who were also thoroughly bored, decided to go on a picnic because we trusted each other and we had been fully vaccinated. Our destination was Kirirom, which had fresh air and we would be isolated from other people. We enjoyed the picnic and even took off masks while having meal and taking pictures. We often used sanitizer, even on our shoe soles and clothes when getting into the car. This should be called a trip with responsibilities.

A few days after the trip, the government announced that there were COVID-19 patients visiting Kirirom and that anyone who had been there should undergo health check-up and keep themselves in quarantine for 14 days. After hearing this, I said to myself, "Having a great time for one day results in 14-day quarantine!" Although I realized that I had low risk of being infected, the case of my older brother kept haunting me. I did not want to bring any problems home and to workplace, so I decided to quarantine myself for 14 days. Cooking all 14-day meals was the responsibility of my mom. I asked myself, "If I go abroad after the pandemic is over, will I be the same as I am now? Even though my parents provide food and

accommodation with care, I still have some fears. What if I go abroad? Will they take care of tourists just like how my mom and dad care about me?"

It was the last day of the quarantine. At night, I was looking at old photos after reading books. I remember the days when people in the world, including myself, were so lucky and blessed with a lot of opportunities, which was taken for granted and overlooked. Just like our family gatherings that had been long neglected; they could have been the most precious time in my life. And when I want to be with my family, I can't easily see them as close as before anymore!

In the midst of COVID-19, I noticed the value of health. I now wish for the health of my family and the people around the world. I also wish for love and mutual help among us.

Hmm...! No matter how happy yesterday life was, we cannot go back. And today, we live with COVID-19, and what about tomorrow?

No matter how good we want our life to be in the future, we can neither determine nor predict!

However, the today is the day to accept reality, learn to live with it bravely and overcome all existing obstacles!

Today we are with COVID-19, but we don't know about tomorrow. There might be another disease which is as dangerous as, or more dangerous than COVID-19. But the most important thing is...

I heard the sound of door locked. I knew it was my brother, Chetra, who came back from hanging out.

Having been cut off my thought, I took a deep breath and said to myself.

"COVID-19 is terrifying but even more terrifying thing is bad human habits that might bring us troubles again in the future! Yesterday is different from today, and what about tomorrow?"