

Comfort and Aid Amidst the Hustle and Bustle

I have been living in Urban Deca Homes Ortigas in Pasig City for just nearly three months. Still, it seems I have already seen more people hurry in and out of the condominium buildings and up and down the elevators than in all the years I spent before living in calmer houses and stiller apartments. The avenue where Urban Deca sits is nowhere different. Ortigas East is a monstrous ruckus of roaring cars, jeepneys, trailers, and buses. In the daily hustle and bustle of the commercialized condominium complex, it appears to be an even more arduous task to care for uneventful matters, like putting soiled and sweaty clothes from yesterday's—maybe also last week's or even last month's—loaded activities in the washing machine and running them after in the dryer. Heck, not even all units in Urban Deca, including the one I am renting, have a washing machine, let alone a dryer.

But that is where Arvie comes in—Arvie, the 25-year-old employee at one of Urban Deca's most prominent providers of laundry services. When I moved to my rented place, Kuya Narvie, my brother-in-law who also resides with my sister in Urban Deca, introduced Arvie to me as the one to call for my laundry needs. Arvie is just one of the many workers and delivery riders crawling in and out of Urban Deca in their respective Mahindra E-Alfa Minis, an open three-wheeler electric passenger vehicle with a 4+1 seating capacity that is quite similar in concept to the Filipino tricycle. Only, for these workers, it is gallons of drinking water and filthy or fresh laundry instead of passengers that they transport in their minis. Arvie is an expert navigator of the electric rickshaw that never runs out of loads of clothes, managing it for full 14-hour daily shifts from 7 in the morning until 9 in the evening at the Daily Bubble Laundry Shop.

Arvie also lives in Urban Deca, but if it wasn't for the laundry service I avail from the Daily Bubble, she would have remained just another co-resident whom I might not even see in the army of people that marches in and out of the condominium on the daily. Convenience is the name of the game, and that is precisely the good that Arvie offers the customers of Daily Bubble like myself in exchange for her service labor.

Every day, Arvie walks fifteen to twenty minutes from the unit she stays in at Urban Deca to the Daily Bubble shop located just outside and one dangerous cross-of-the-highway away from the condominium. The unit is not hers, however. It is rather owned by her

employers, an old couple that started the laundry business three years ago, who let her live in their unit with no utility bills to pay.

Then her workday officially starts at 7 AM, just in time for the rush hour of Ortigas Avenue to make every cross and trip along it potentially injurious to both pedestrians and motorists alike. By this time, it is not only the Mahindra Mini that Arvie has to navigate. She would also start receiving calls and texts through the Daily Bubble's official Viber account, each of which she would have to pick up or respond to. These calls and texts demand different things: some ask for a laundry pickup like my biweekly messages of *Hello po. Magpapapick up po ako today ng laundry. Thank you po*, while others inquire about the laundry they failed to receive the previous day. Unsurprisingly, it is not uncommon for Arvie to miss calls or acknowledge some texts minutes or even hours later, prompting impatient double replies or another call from customers who robotically move in fast paces throughout the day.

Arvie's main task at work is to pick up and deliver laundry to and from Daily Bubble's patrons. She is always on-call – always on stand-by – when customers from Urban Deca, as well as residents of Cuidad Grande, a small subdivision over which towers Urban Deca's sky-reaching condominium units, request laundry pickup. Considering, however, Urban Deca's multitude of customers residing in its six 15- or 16-storey buildings of around a thousand units each (the condominium complex is actually still in the process of constructing at least three more buildings to fulfill its complete floor plan), Arvie often hangs around in the condominium's designated delivery area, loitering and conversing with delivery riders of drinking water providers and Shopee and Lazada parcels as she waits for customers to come down with their dirty laundry or for their freshly packed clothes.

"Pinaka-ayaw ko is 'yung matagal bumaba ang mga customer namin," Arvie admitted, but she laughingly joked too about the length of her patience when waiting for customers. "Mahaba po, mas mahaba pa sa building ng [Urban] Deca." I suppose this is a skill she has managed to develop and enhance over the almost nine months she has been working for Daily Bubble. The delivery area might sound like some exclusive space inside Urban Deca specially designed for that purpose, but no. It is simply the open ground floor of one of the buildings. My sister told me once that Urban Deca is planning to construct an "actual" delivery area for the delivery riders, but until then, it seems that they and Arvie would have to endure waiting in

that makeshift under the sun, rain, and liquid droplets from air-conditioning units which I have often mistaken for drizzle.

But even then, Arvie's enthusiasm persists. "Masaya, nakakatuwa ang pagpick up. Nakakakilala ako ng mga bagong kaibigan." This enthusiasm I have also witnessed myself every time I would bring or get from her my own laundry and she would greet me with a solemn smile.

Back at the Daily Bubble shop, in addition to picking up and delivering laundry, Arvie would also need to fold clothes – the easiest task according to her – and pack them in transparent plastic bags that she herself would bring to the customers through the Mahindra Mini. Such sounds incredibly tedious to me, but Arvie countered my opinion. "Actually walang mahirap sa trabaho namin as laundry staff." To my face, a stranger who is connected to Arvie by nothing more than the transactional service she accords me, nothing may really be difficult. But I wonder what Arvie reveals in tirades to her co-workers and closest friends and mutters to herself when she is alone about her daily grind at work. For a Filipino woman in the service labor industry, there bleeds the saturated tint of the "caring Filipino," as Manalansan calls it, from oneself to the work one does in the name of serving and being servile. Such is a predilection so inherent that it may just be masking Arvie's real sentiments away from the customers she is supposed to be "serving."

However, even this arguable statement of Arvie does not counter the fact that the road from the laundry shop to Urban Deca is perilous – possibly even fatal if one fails to take extra care crossing it. Arvie in her Mahindra Mini is no match for other automobiles that always seem to be racing down Ortigas Avenue, rarely receding to let anyone or anything take over. Although it is technically not illegal for e-trikes like the Mahindra Mini to be driven along highways if the requirements are met and proper authorization is given (TopGear), the concern lies in the structural stability that e-trikes relatively lack. Having only three wheels – one in front and two at the back – makes them more prone to tip over, particularly along uneven roads and while making sharp turns ("Are E-Trikes Safe for Use in Highways?"). Another issue is the Mahindra Mini's structural size which jeopardizes its visibility to other vehicles on the road. Once, an e-bike hit the back of the Mahindra while Arvie was passing across. Luckily, Arvie was able to cross without any scrape, but this does not guarantee the same luck should another

similar instance happen, especially if it were to be a truck instead. In this sense, it is remarkably striking how the convenience that Arvie's labor brings to customers comes with a threatening price.

And yet, this probable hefty charge remains inconsiderately unaccounted for by Arvie's daily salary of a meager 350 pesos. Arvie shares that her wage has already increased from the 300-peso initial salary that she used to receive when she started working at the Daily Bubble, but even with the increase, Arvie would have to be living and working in Region 4B, Region 8, or perhaps even Region 13 to be considered legally and rightfully compensated. I asked her if she had already attempted to ask for another salary increase, and I got a no for an answer. I avoided following that question with a why, but I surmise it is because of the free accommodation Arvie is already accorded by her employers whom she described as "kind." "Okay naman po sila, mabait. Ang tawag ko po sa kanila [ay] 'ma'am' and 'sir'," Arvie said. It is difficult to deny the evident tinge of *utang na loob* in her statement, a uniquely Filipino concept of indebtedness due to gratitude. I personally think it can have its upsides, but I also share the same opinion as Bido who wrote that it can be a burden for the one indebted and be turned into an instrument of exploitation in contexts such as the workplace by whom it is owed. I do not know if Arvie feels the same way, or if she even entertains the idea that she could possibly be exploited as a service worker. But my impression remains that perhaps she is.

By 9 PM, at the end of every long shift of picking up, folding, and delivering clothes to customers, Arvie has to accomplish and submit a sales report. She did not elaborate on this, but perhaps it is because it is a confidential component of the business. Then the cycle repeats the next day, the day after, and so on, as Arvie's "no work, no pay" employment basis only allows breaks on the days of the Holy Week, Christmas, and New Year.

Despite the fun and ease of the work, Arvie nonetheless responds positively to the thought of quitting, citing the inevitable weariness and laziness that visit her regularly at work as reasons why. But I surmise that it is the contradicting thought of money, water, and hunger — things, along with exhaustion, that Arvie said cross her mind while attending to her work — that keeps her committed to her job. Arvie, therefore, has only had a few absences at most so far due to fever, a cause that overrides her work obligation which grants her a pay that barely pays for living.

Like the countless tenants, unit-owners, security guards, janitors, and other service workers that nestle and/or make a living within Urban Deca, a condominium complex that advertises itself as “the closest home you can own” and “homes within reach,” Arvie is yet another face that I would spot perhaps only after I make those biweekly texts to the Daily Bubble for biweekly laundry schedule. But these faces — these people of whom I can never know with full understanding the names, stories, and daily activities — are exactly the ones that forge the otherwise inhuman walls and structures of the Urban Deca into a home within reach. With them, convenience becomes not the whole name of the game but only a part of it, offering their invaluable help and making room for comfort and security amidst the nonstop daily grind.

Works Cited

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