

Milk

The room is barely eight feet wide. It is one of the cramped units stacked like boxes in a three-tiered wooden apartment built at the center of a neighborhood powered by 5-6 debt--run, owned, and milked dry by *Aling Buding*.

Spinster by label, capitalist by calling; childless, husbandless, yet mother to rent hikes, bingo pot cuts, and compound-wide interest schemes. She never bore children, but she made a living squeezing rent from every square inch of someone else's need.

Rust blooms over the galvanized sheets. The corners lean, fragile--ready to collapse when *The Big One* comes. A folding table rests in the corner, its legs shaky, pushed aside nightly to unroll a sleeping mat that sags at the center, just wide enough for a man, his wife, and their child.

The single window faces a wall, barely letting light in. The air is thick with mold from the bathroom where the sink and toilet share a square meter. Everything in this room serves a purpose. Nothing exists that doesn't pay for its place.

It is always hot. It always smells like reheated oil and tired skin, the walls turning into a skillet from two to five, cooking everyone inside.

He is a security guard for a warehouse that barely pays minimum. Fourteen-hour shifts in a plastic chair and knock-off *Converse*. He guards rusted pipes and rejected tiles for a company that denies him even a uniform allowance, much less health care.

Most days, he walks home with sore calves and a dull headache after resisting sleep beneath the midnight sun.

But no pain hurts more than hearing his baby cry from hunger.

That afternoon had been long. His wife tried to rock their daughter to sleep, but she wouldn't stop crying. She had been fed bits of mashed rice, soaked in a broth faked with *Knorr*, but it wasn't enough. The last pack of milk ran out before lunch. There was no money to buy more.

Her cries thinned into hoarse gasps--pitiful sounds that clawed through him. She cried until she choked on air. Still, he could do nothing.

He looked at his wife. He remembered the months before their daughter arrived--how he used his earnings to buy her nutritious food. Every *payday*, he brought home *malunggay* capsules, eggs, fresh vegetables, and imported supplements when he could. He believed that if her body had everything it needed, milk would come naturally. Breastfeeding would spare them this agony.

But when the baby arrived, her breasts swelled with pain, not milk. The doctor called it a glandular issue--not uncommon, but devastating. No amount of massage or food helped. Her breasts hardened, fevered, then failed. She cried the first time she fed the baby formula.

They argued days ago about infant milk. A single pack now costs nearly a day's wage. Grocery visits feel like robbery sanctioned by economy. Milk prices had doubled in two years. Marcos's *ayuda* came late--if at all. The registration failed. The office stayed closed.

He pays taxes, follows rules, works honestly. And yet here he was, debating brands of milk based on grams alone. The irony stung worse than poverty. He lives in a country where crime pays more than labor--and love, fatherly love, can't fill an empty stomach.

He opened the fridge for the third time that night. It hummed unevenly. A secondhand buy from a neighbor, paid for with his *13th-month pay* the year before. Not for food storage--there was rarely food to store--but for cold water. Buying ice every day cost more. Cold water after a hot shift was priceless.

There was only tap water and a canister of hardened oil. He stared, willing something to appear. When he turned around, his wife didn't speak. Her eyes, hollow with fatigue, met his. Not with blame, but with a shared defeat.

He kissed the baby's head. She had fallen asleep from exhaustion, breath hiccupping against his shoulder.

In the dark, he sat with his aging phone. *Facebook Marketplace*. Then, a post:
"*Earn extra in X (formerly Twitter). Fast. No judgment.*" He scrolled past. Then back.

Clicked. Curiosity, he told himself. His stomach twisted. Men. Shirtless. Some in towels. Some barely covered. Their bios were coded:

'Openminded.'

'Chill lang.'

'No limits.'

He didn't understand the codes, but he understood the offers.

Direct messages.

Meetups.

Rates.

One thousand pesos for a quickie.

The cost of a pack of milk, diapers, and meals.

He locked the phone. Then unlocked it. Hovered over the screen. He had never kissed a man. Never wanted to. The thought nauseated him.

But the sound of his baby choking on hunger hurt more. Time pressed down on her empty stomach. No one would help. There were no second shifts. No emergency loans.

Certainly not from *Aling Buding*--who wouldn't lend a peso unless it returned with interest and a half-month's rent as collateral. She never cared for babies unless they came with mothers who paid on time. Just this offer, glowing black on his phone.

He created an account. Blank profile. No photo. Username: a string of numbers. Bio: *'First timer. Sekyu. Panggatas lang.'*

Minutes later, a message appeared: *"2k muna. G?"* He stared. Then typed: *"San po ba?"* and pressed send.

A twink, probably about to turn 19, met him at *Conrad*--not the roadside inn *Tayuman*, but the five-star that smelled of imported leather and lemon oil.

Fitted white polo. Tailored chinos. Manicured hands brushing lint from his collar. A luxury watch--the kind his boss wore in his SUV.

When the twink smiled, it was soft, practiced. Then, offhandedly, he asked, "*Ready ka na ba?*"

It wasn't flirtation. It wasn't curiosity. It was command wrapped in velvet.

The guard stood 5'8", naturally built with no help from the gym. Fourteen-hour shifts carved thick thighs. His jeans wrapped around them like denim skin. His arms carried a quiet strength--corded and lean. His chest was firm, his back wide, tapering down to a narrow waist--the signature of a V-shaped torso. His jaw was square, cut sharply like the edge of a coin, with dark stubble hugging the line from chin to ear.

His mother, *Cebuana*--fine-boned, strong. His father, half-Italian--long gone, but generous with genes. In another world, he might've been scouted for modeling.

Here at *Conrad*, he was security. Paid by the hour. Tired, proud, and cornered.

The twink circled him slowly. Reverent. His hands traced a map drawn by his eyes. Tongue to chest, then ribs, then stomach. Breath caught in his throat as he neared the neck. He stayed still. He let it happen.

Thoughts moved, sluggish and thick--like concrete setting in the head. Don't look. Don't speak. Just get through. He thought of the street outside. The white light of *Mercury*. The baby's fingers twitching in sleep. He thought of the silence that hung in the

house when the crying stopped--not because comfort came, but because the body gave up.

And he thought: this is not about me.

It's not skin.

Not sin.

It's milk.

His mouth hovered at the hips but did not descend--not yet. Instead, he turned back upward, mouth grazing the underarm, kissing the salt that had lived there all day, then up to the arms--one, then the other--tongue outlining every groove.

He kissed the guard's wrist, the knuckles, even the veins that ran like roots beneath the skin. When he moved to the neck, his breath caught in his throat.

The guard smelled like asphalt and soap--clean but lived-in. He reached the jawline slowly, reverently. But as his mouth neared the lips, the guard turned away and said quietly, "*Sir, pwede po ba d'yan na lang sa katawan, pababa?*"

There was no shame in the twink's pause. No hurt. Only a kind of internal nod, as if he had expected it, maybe even respected it.

Instead, his fingers lowered to the waistband. He did not pull--only hovered. He felt the weight beneath the denim, the tension of something barely restrained. He placed his palm there, gently, almost reverently.

The twink slid the waistband down with care, unveiling something large, full, and foreign. It rested heavy in his hand--his fingers could not circle it. His head bowed as though in prayer. And as he guided it toward his lips, he closed his eyes--not out of shame, but out of wonder.

As if this act, in all its silence and sweat, might mean something more than money. As if it were a gift passed between strangers. A kind of hunger met, in different ways.

The twink handed him an envelope. *Two thousand*, folded clean. No words. No awkward smiles. No shame. Just a nod, like one does after finishing a meal.

For the twink, there was nothing to feel guilty about. He wasn't buying the guard's conscience. He was buying his lust. His milk had been delivered.

The guard didn't stay long at the hotel. There was no lingering, no moment to breathe beneath crisp sheets or warm water. He left as soon as the money touched his hand. Showering there felt dishonest. Too clean for what he had done. Besides, there was no time. It was past eight, and that *Mercury* near the corner would close at nine.

He walked fast, each step measured, his throat tight with purpose.

Under the white light of *Mercury*, he bought milk. The cashier didn't look twice. Just handed the plastic bag and the change, not knowing it cost a man's silence to pay for it.

The guard walked home, the envelope damp in his fist.

The wife doesn't ask. She warms the water, fixes the formula. She doesn't look at him, but when the milk touches the bottle, her shoulders drop--not in relief, but in surrender. As if she, too, has paid for it, somehow.

The daughter, with fresh tears still clinging to her cheeks, sucks on the bottle hungrily after a nine-hour gap.

He just sits in the corner, staring at the floor, trying to stitch his pride back together with each breath. But the stitches are loose. And the guilt hangs heavy.

He walks to the bathroom. The water sputters as usual, and the soap in the dish has thinned to a curl since his first shower to ready for *Conrad*. He scrubs anyway-- from hair to heels. The towel is damp, smelling faintly of sun.

He dries himself off. Breathes slowly.

Then, puts on the same *Blue Corner* shirt and jeans. No patch. No badge. But to him, still a uniform. Not one that draws attention. But one that helps him carry things. Like weight. Like memory. Like being a guard, when that's all he has left--when being a man, and being a husband, no longer feel like enough.

His daughter sleeps. The kiss for his wife hides inside him. He shuts the door behind him. He walks to work.

He leaves the room--the one that had held them all in silence.