

# *In My Father's Shoes*

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**I**t was difficult to ask my mother questions about my father after he died in 2001, but my sister and I heard stories about him all the time. She would, nearly with every chore she did in the house and every person she talked to on the telephone, break into intense testaments of praise and vivid resurrections of memory in a high-pitched voice that reminded us of anger or frustration. No one could reprimand her effectively, the way she would sharply shock us with sermons in our childhood, after all, the love of her life and ours was dead. “*Ang Daddy ganito. Ang Daddy hindi ganyan.*” and so on.

But when I pushed a micro-recorder in front of her while we were eating dinner and asked her about father, she softened, became closer to silence than to voice and I was nowhere near any answer.

Maybe it was the question, “Mommy, do you still have Daddy’s shoes?” That silenced her. There was no moral mentioned, there was no virtue or vice to be explained with my father as central metaphor. This was a question about something tangible in all our lives. Where are all of my father’s shoes?

A dead man’s feet are stiff. A dead man cannot wear his shoes. I remember telling the embalmer to put his favorite pair of dress shoes on his feet. I remember holding them like a pair of black kittens and passing them to someone in that funeral parlor. Now I don’t know where they are. I do not remember what they look like. But I do remember shoes were important to my father.

I prodded mother and started with the simplest of questions and I learned that he was a size seven. He always wore dress shoes. He shined his own shoes and sometimes ours, when he wasn't busy being a pediatrician. His father, Tatay Clemente, owned the largest (so she says) shoe factory in Marikina then, Alex Shoes and made all his shoes for him. He always bought two pairs of shoes. He only started buying his own shoes after the factory closed. After all, my mother said, they were the Guevaras who started the shoe industry in Marikina.

It was not a topic greatly discussed even in my childhood, and was only mentioned in passing, usually when June came around and school shoes were bought at Cardams or Otto Shoes because they were Marikina shoes, and the word Marikina was synonymous to quality. Father took special care in the shops to hold the shoe and look at the soles to see if they were real leather and stitched all the way around. Those shoes lasted for years.

There were signs of my father's shoe scion past. When we moved to Silay in Negros Occidental and we were far from Marikina, he would have us step barefoot on a piece of bond paper and trace the shape of our feet on the paper and take it with him when he went to Manila. The pencil against the arch of our soles made us giggle. He had a scar on his left cheek shaped in the thin crescent of a horseshoe. He pulled the tail of a horse in the ranch in Calapan, Mindoro in his youth. I have a picture of him when he was a teenager. He was happy in a Lady Triumph sports car.

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On the corner of Miguelin Street and España Street is the makeshift table of the *sapatero*, Ely "Bay" Rebong. He has been there for nearly 30 years, plying his trade in front of the Old Prudential Bank that has been around just a little longer than him. His costumer of twenty five years, Alfredo Gozum, calls him "*kaibigan*" and talks to him even when he has no shoes for shining or repair. That day, when I jumped out of an FX to UST to finally talk to him, his stall was damp: thin plywood peeling off looking more like wood shavings from age. It reminded me of the inverted hull of an old beached boat never to set sail again.

I needed him to spell out his name, and with shaky polish-stained hands he obliged and joked that he hadn't written anything down in a long

time. I wanted to look at his stall closely, at the shoes he had on the table, “FOR SALE” written in pentel pen propped on the cement, but he said it was raining so hard and his goods were not in order.

I think he knows that I know his stall had always looked that way, an installation more than a display of old shoes from his many customers. Those who were not able to pay for his services left him their shoes. And so there they were, growing like history on the old bank wall.

Like a security guard, he sits beside the security guards who joke that the reason why this Prudential bank hasn’t ever been robbed was that robbers were afraid of Mang Ely. I thought that Mang Ely looked like Don Quixote without his armor, his old horse or his grand dreams.

That day, Mang Ely was shining the shoes of one of the security guards. Sitting on his haunches, he applied blackening fluid and waited for it to dry. After that, he applied shoe wax and buffed them with a rag. He said everyone from the train tracks to the professors of UST knew of him. He said for a shoe shine twenty-five years ago, he charged two pesos, and you could buy rice and milk with two pesos then. Now, he charges twenty to twenty five pesos, and that can only afford him a little rice and sugar.

He wiped his hands on the same rag he used to polish the shoes and dug into his pocket for his wallet and pulled out a calling card:

### **“Bay”**

Shoe Repair Shop

We specialized Men & Ladies, Children Shoes made and repair

“Quality repair is our Guarantee”

Ely “Bay” Rebong

Proprietor/ Manager

Miguelin St. corner

Espana Sampaloc Manila

Contact Ben A. Mabini

Tel. # 732-03-53

He used to own a shoe repair shop on Mabini. Americans and Japanese tourists would ask him to make leather boots, low-cut shoes and high-cut shoes and, after a fitting, they could have the shoes in two days. Three days, when there were many customers. Made-to-order shoes, he calls them. And there were many made-to-order shoe shops like his. Besa. Glenmore. Those were busy days then.

“*May magic ako.*” His small face beamed. He took the rag and pushed it into the hollow of his loosely closed fist. He waved his fist around and gestured like a circus ring leader, and with a flick of the wrist he made his rag disappear. He did magic to pass the time and to keep his hands and fingers nimble. The kids on his street would gather around him in pairs and there was a time he had fifteen kids prodding him for magic. Sometimes he did magic all day because there were no customers. He was well loved by Miguelin Street. Rio, the owner of a *carinderia* at the end of the street would give him hot food and hot rice in thin plastic bags. Alfred Gozum and several other men would stop by and chat with him for hours.

Alfred said, “*Palagi akong nagpapashine nang sapatos kasi kapag malinis ang sapatos mo, maganda kang tignan.*”

“*Meron pa akong isang magic.*” Mang Ely took a peso and tucked it in his fist. His wrist was weak this time and I saw the coin pass from hand to hand. He scratched his head and gave me a shy smile.

I looked at my red muddied Camper shoes and had them shined.

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“*Ang shoes ng Daddy mo, na kay Uncle Totoy mo.*” She said on the Sunday of our del Carmen reunion which was to happen in our compound in Maryland Street, Cubao. “*Kung gusto mo, sumama ka sa kanila pagkatapos ng party. Ipapakita niya sa iyo. Magbihis ka na.*”

Ten o'clock in the morning, she knocked on my door to tell me that. My room was on the top floor. My narrow herb garden gave off an intense scent of basil in the near noon heat. I dressed slowly. I was not much for reunions. I was always the odd one, with hair too long, and not a doctor, a lawyer or a businessman. I made an effort to go to these reunions after my father died. I deliberately wore clothes that didn't match to appear more or

less normal. I took a deep breath and went down the stairs. It felt like I was diving into the deepest part of the ocean.

Del Carmen children ran around the compound; del Carmen men drank their beer; del Carmen women sat plumply, eating. I made my rounds, kissing cheeks, putting food on my plate. This compound used to be one of the lots of the del Carmens' old houses. Divided fairly among the eleven children, it was a safe haven for close relations.

I remember always seeing my father with my Uncle Totoy, one of my mother's older brothers, in these reunions. My Uncle Totoy was sitting in his faded striped shirt with the men. I watched him from the corner of my eye. He was a dentist like my mother. But his skin was burnt brown by his years of fieldwork as an investigator for the Central Intelligence. He was the darkest one of my uncles on my mother's side. He had a huge smile and his eyelids wrinkled when he laughed. His hair was fiercely dyed a strong black. I realized I had never really heard him speak. I was always some distance from everyone else.

Father was a heavy smoker but he didn't drink. He would sit in a striped Collezione shirt beside my equally stripe-shirted uncles, hands usually on his knees trading jokes and stories. In the beginning, when he was healthy it was such a strong image: beloved doctor talking to other doctor relatives. He was the most passionate storyteller of the lot. His cheekbones were high, like mine. His smile was wide. He had a little belly that jiggled from all that *lechon*. But in the last few years before his death, though the same gestures were there, the same talk, he was gaunt and wheezing, though he looked very brave.

My Uncle Totoy was my father's best friend, my mother said. But that was not the reason she had for giving him my father's shoes. They had the same shoe size, she said. It was practical to do so. It was also practical to schedule a viewing of my father's shoes. She had called him during the week when I started looking for them. She went straight into making the appointment. It was to happen after lunch, around three.

I remember we only went to one Guevara reunion. I was in college then. I remember it was said to happen regularly in May. I remember my Father bringing home these huge T-shirts with the word Guevara printed in bold red. We sat in the garden of a resthouse somewhere in Marikina along with other color-coded Guevaras. I remember my father shaking

his head while driving back home to Cubao. We never went to another reunion again.

I only saw the Guevaras on All Soul's Day on the family plot in Loyola in Marikina. These were his brothers, my Uncle Bodie and my Uncle Boy. My Nanay, my Auntie Ossie and Auntie Linda were in the U.S. My Auntie Linda left nearly twelve years before anyone else. My Auntie Ossie and my Nanay followed after she was married in 1991. Uncle Boy was to follow a few years after. And after Uncle Bodie died, we didn't see anyone at all.

I remember we sat on foldable stools and ate on paper plates around the old marble *lapida* of my Tatay Clemente. Those uncles and my father told fabulous stories about the good old days: looking for tanso on the banks of a clear Marikina River when they were boys to sell for a few centavos. A favorite tale would be how they thought that Nanay's sweet corn was the sweetest corn in Marikina, and that it was even more magical because it looked like the pale cheap corn they fed to horses and chickens. They discovered later on that it was because she added sugar to the boiling water.

They always said that I dressed like my Auntie Linda. She was wild in her day, in her leopard prints and bandanas and Jackie O shades. Always living inside her head. They would talk from sunset to midnight. And we children, my sister and my cousins Mia and Rocky Boy would collect wax from the melting candles on any grave we could find them on, rolling them into balls until they looked like the marbled jades in some dragons' mouths.

A del Carmen reunion was brief as are all reunions of people who never really talk. We stepped into Uncle Feli's van and drove off to Seventh Avenue in Cubao. It was a quiet trip, with the two del Carmen brothers quickly disengaging and moving into their houses. They were neighbors.

There was a huge replica of Our Lady of Manaoag in the small living room of my Uncle Totoy's house. She had a mustard yellow polyester robe, and gold synthetic fringe around the wrists and hem of her white inner dress. She perched on a chipped blue-white cloud.

Uncle talked to me the entire time, looking at me in the eye. We sat close to each other. He took the chair near the door; I took the couch. But his story was as distant as the events he narrated. He even talked about me, saying my name as if I were not there. My cousin Jan sat beside Uncle Totoy. He was to take me home after. He had just defended his thesis the

day before and was still groggy. Uncle Totoy said that Jan wore my father's dress shoes for his college thesis defense. He was such a big boy. And his skin was milk white. Five-eight, maybe. How could he have possibly fit into those shoes? But he did.

Uncle Totoy told me that my father went to Pangasinan to see the Lady of Manaoag in 2000. He asked for ninety days to live because my sister had just given birth to his first grandson Elijah, and he wanted to spend time with him. He got better after that; he was even able to drive again. But after the ninety days were up, my father suffered his last heart attack and died.

Uncle Totoy said one of my uncles who was living in the States always sent him Florsheim shoes while he was studying. When he graduated and had to buy his own shoes, he always bought Alex Shoes. He didn't realize that my Tatay Clemente made the *hulmahan* for Alex Shoes. This was in the sixties. By the time my uncle and my father met, in the seventies, Tatay Clemente had left the shoe industry and was taking care of the fishpond and ranch in Mindoro.

He said my father bought shoes from Marikina even long after the Guevaras had left the business. A few minutes after our conversation had begun, my Uncle started crying. There was a lump in my throat, too. I asked my questions bravely. He said things that my father only whispered. "*Marami siyang plano para sa kaniyang mga anak. Marami siyang pinangarap para kay Ricci na hindi natuloy.*" He looked straight at me. I wasn't in that room at all.

I asked to see the shoes. He stood up and went into his room with Jan and came back with five pairs of shoes. We took inventory. He wasn't sure of the names of certain kinds of shoes. When I lifted a dark brown pair with a pattern of holes punched over the ankle and the nose, he just said there were shoes for formal occasions. Dress shoes.

Two pairs of Swatch Shoes moccasins. Dark brown. Suede with floppy suede shoe laces.

One pair of Rusty Lopez moccasins. Dark Brown. Calf leather.

One pair of dress shoes with gold buckle, its label worn off.

One pair of Rusty Lopez dress shoes with straight laces. Dark Brown. Pattern of holes punched in.

He said that there were eight pairs given to him. Since they shared everything in his household, his nephews borrowed them from time to time. So father's shoes were still walking on the streets out there in the world.

My father wasn't a fan of black shoes. All five pairs were brown in various levels of fashion. His moccasins were my Uncle Totoy's favorite. Rusty Lopez. Dark Brown. It had a small nose and little leather tassels. The pair had a gash on the left shoe, but they still held their shape.

The shoes looked warm in the middle of the living room floor. Like my father was going to step back into them anytime. I found my eyes wandering through doorways. I lifted a camel brown shiny dress shoe with a buckle on its side and felt young again. Good leather. Not a scratch on it. Solid tip. Leather sole sewn in. Not a stitch out of place.