Shoes from My Father

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The first shoes my father ever bought for me were a pair of blue Patrick Ewings—high-cut, heavy-duty rubber shoes with Velcro straps. They were from Seoul, where he worked odd jobs during the cusp of a technological boom. The Ewings were meant to be worn on my first birthday.

Family pictures told a different story. My one-year-old version was about to blow a candle, wearing shoddy *pambahay* and barefoot. Mom told me that I had refused to wear decent clothing during my birthday. I had stomped and shrieked my way out of a crisp polo, little khakis, and the shoes.

Dad never failed to remind me, whenever the photo albums were pulled out, that he had shelled out hard-earned won for the complete set. He would emphasize that the shoes were the most expensive.

Along with my birthday pictures were of my father, then a twenty-four-year-old overseas worker. One picture stood out. He was standing in the middle of a snow-covered neighborhood street. The whiteness of everything matched his complexion. He was smiling, his long floppy hair whipped by the winter wind. His distinguishing features—bushy eyebrows, protruding lips, lanky frame—would remind me of my own in my twenties. Our close resemblance was uncanny, relatives would say. The subtext was always clear: For someone who looked alike, we fought too much about our differences. His return to Manila spelled out these differences through the years. Our relationship was tenuous and uncomfortable, like trying to walk with two left pairs of shoes.

My father's presence was at its most palpable in shoe shopping, a middle-class rite of passage in personal responsibility. I am giving you something of value, he seemed to say. Look after it. Dad would take me to the department store, testing pairs of Tretorns that could serve many purposes. Occasionally thrown in to the mix were durable buckled sandals as substitutes. We went through the same ritual for school shoes. He was more decisive with those—time-tested black Walk-Overs. Other brands were subpar. After every

purchase, he would make me sit beside him, shoe-shining kit in hand. He would pick up one shoe, smear wax all over it with a sock over his hand, then shine it vigorously with a brush. He would go through the process carefully, stating the instructions for me. The shoes should last at least two school years, he would throw as a parting shot. Our garage was proof of this kind of maintenance. On long wooden shelves, plastic cases and carton shoe boxes were stacked on top of each other. Labels were scribbled on boxes: name of the owner, brand, color. If shoes were not placed in boxes, they were lined side by side on the floor, being aired out before keeping them in storage.

I had been the bane of my father's well-kept ritual. My rarely-shined leather shoes in grade school lasted only a year; six months in fourth grade when I used them to play *patintero* after school. They were strewn on the doormat whenever I arrived home. My other shoes, though well-worn for a couple of years, were so unusable that they had to be thrown out.

Dad used to shout at me over those misuses. The frat man's large voice boomed as he barraged me with questions: *Bakit nakakalat?* Why do you use them to run on pavement? *Bakit ba kasi ginagamit sa patintero?* I would shake my head, not daring to say out loud what I had thought: They were just shoes; what was the big deal? While I tried to shine and arrange them whenever he ordered me to, I never picked up his habits. No amount of shouting made me.

Being Dad's antithesis in shoe maintenance stuck as I grew up. But I did develop his appreciation for footwear and how they tied up a look. I was in high school when leather flip-flops inched their way into the market. Dad kept his imported black-and-brown pair in their original plastic case. At the time we were the same height. Our shoe sizes were not far from each other.

I made the mistake of borrowing his leather flip-flops for a summer org meeting, determined to impress a group mate with my grown-up style. I made the bigger mistake of dropping by his office in the university out of habit. What followed were pointed reminders on personal belongings and an order to go home.

"I can't," I stammered, defiant but scared at fifteen. He made me clarify why I could not. My reason involved Burger King and a boy.

Something must have clicked in his head that day. He took it all in: dressy pants, well-pressed white polo, overpowering cologne. My toes curled in his borrowed sandals, aware of the scrutiny.

"Go home," he ordered for a second time. I did not.

I got home that day much later than Dad did. He was working on his computer, but I knew he heard me walking toward our apartment. Before entering, I grabbed the sandals, briskly rubbed their soles together, and clapped them many times to shake off the dirt. I made sure that he heard what I was doing.

"*Tama na!*" he bellowed over my ruckus. He looked at me: silent appraisal with a hint of anger. He would give me that look in more instances—in a house that would become too small for us, circling around our landmine of an issue.

Our old unit was at the end of a long apartment block. My steps had become lithe when I started arriving past my curfew during senior year. The shoes helped: black loafers bought by my maternal grandfather. They were my favorite pair, made of light Italian leather with breathable soles. All the others my father bought before had been relegated to their dusty, well-arranged boxes. They made too much noise to walk in, too much effort to put on before my classmate's house help could suspect anything.

Most times, I would open the door into the dark living room, mindful of the creak. Some unlucky nights, the fluorescent light spilled out into the small patio. I would try to enter unnoticed, never forgetting to wipe my shoes on the door mat. Dad would comment on how late it was, slurring his words. Alcohol always fueled whatever we were set to fight about. That night, it was about breaking curfew. The week before, it was about my broken laptop. Months ago, it was about a missing software installer. I would keep my words in check—at the start. I came from a meeting for the school paper that night. He scoffed at that. No high school meeting would last that long, he spewed out.

Dad would give me that look: thick eyebrows bunched in the middle, lips set in a straight line, eyes squinted and bloodshot. It was unnerving, but I had learned how to tamp down any feeling of intimidation. The moment would not last long. We would trade arguments but always sidestepping around our issue. Months ago, the fight was not about the installer; it was about the boy who accompanied me to borrow it from his office. The week before, our argument had little to do about the broken laptop, more about what I used it for late at night, with no eyes to check what kind of websites I had been visiting.

That night, we both knew that we were not talking about a broken curfew, but about what I did after school. And with whom.

I had heard then of parents wanting to talk it out with their kids, about "being different." I had been asked by high school teachers what my parents—"your dad," they would specify—thought about me. I would shrug, which summarized our progress in that conversation.

My father made his points across in the most combative of expressions. He had gotten involved in college frat rumbles, confronting boys with knuckles about petty slights. He complained to Mom about her salty, oily adobo. He shouted at me for sleeping too late, slipping from the honor roll, destroying my shoes. But Dad continued to sidestep with me until we were tired, until we just ignored each other. Like all the shoes that he bought for me, we kept our issue on the dusty shelf throughout my teenage years.

I chose the state university for college, away from the Catholic one where my father's footsteps echoed. The transfer meant more well-meaning relatives gave in to my requests for new shoes. I used the excuse of not having to wear a uniform on campus. Chuck Taylors came my way and became a staple when I was in college. They were easy to match, easy to wear in a new, sprawling school.

My Chucks became a silent witness to the things college kids were wont to do. My black no-lace disintegrated from overuse, wearing them from class straight to a late night of driving around Manila. My gray double-tongue had smudges of vomit—mine or someone else's—during a house party that got out of hand. The blue ones had been frayed on the side from too much walking, with male classmates who were as nervous as I was.

The silence between my father and me grew larger. He had become busy in his new supervisory job, while I had become preoccupied with a newfound freedom. The few times that we shared a breakfast table, our dearth of topics became more glaring. I would ask him about work. He would respond with a one-sentence rant about sloppy work and missed deadlines. On my end, I would assure him that I was working to graduate with honors despite staying out late.

We knew our roles. I had to do well in school, eager for academic performance not to become another issue. He learned not to ask questions about what kept me late. Shrugs and excuses protected everything that I was not willing to reveal.

My curfew progressed from late to later to nonexistent. After midnight, I would leave my Chucks scattered by the door. Every morning I would find them arranged on the side of the mat. Running late for class, I would shoot

a quick apology to my mom before jetting out of the gate. She told me once that it was Dad who had been placing my shoes aside every morning.

Later when I was a junior in college, Dad flew to Australia to visit my uncle for a month. The day he returned home, Mom greeted him at the door with a tight hug. My brother followed suit, taking my father's hand to his forehead. I stood behind, saying a weak "Hello."

He glanced at my direction and said he had something for me. Things, actually: shirts, pants, and a pair of white lace-up Chucks. I found out later that he scrimped on his own pocket money so he could afford all of those. I noticed that I had more stuff than my brother.

The Chucks were two inches too big, but nothing thick socks could not solve. Once, I offered to lend them to Dad. He reminded me that we no longer had the same shoe size.

I had to wonder if pride kept us from sitting down and talking about it. There had been times when I knew that he knew. It was easy to overhear a man's voice during my long phone conversations. There had been times when he would take me back to square one, like asking if the girl he kept hearing from me was my girlfriend. Sometimes the tone would be different: irritated comments about a shirt one size too small or the point of folded shorts. But we kept to ourselves most of the time.

Maybe we had made our relationship work. Maybe our problem solved itself on the overhead shelf. I decided to risk proving myself on Christmas Eve.

I planned to introduce my then boyfriend. He had met my parents during one dinner, but I knew that taking him to *noche buena* was a statement.

As I stood by the door, my feet were sweating in my brown boat shoes. I forgot to put on socks in haste. My father took one look at him. After a quick scrutiny, Dad extended a hand to him—a firm handshake from the look of it.

What happened next was a pleasant blur. He and Dad were exchanging stories over beer and *sisig*. He grew up in the same neighborhood Dad was brought up in. My father asked him about school, impressed that he was majoring in the hard sciences. The stories came fast and easy between them. He appeared bright and unassuming as my father regarded him.

I was putting on my shoes at the door when Dad called out to say that he was welcome to drop by any time. Walking away from our house, he told me that I had scared him for nothing.

"Your dad is nice," he said, his breath giving off the strong scent of Pale Pilsen. I chose not to reply. In our dark, deserted street, I took his hand, my steps echoing in the quiet hours before Christmas.

The years with my first boyfriend were easy, too comfortable even. Dad would see him—"your best friend," as he referred to the boyfriend—in and out of the house. Dad had seen him drunk, sprawled on my bed as I tried to nurse him back to sobriety. He had seen gifts from him, including pressed flowers on frame. He commented how artistic he was. Dad had seen two pairs of slippers in front of my locked door. He knew he had to knock.

When we had finally broken up, Dad started seeing him less in the house. Drinking by himself, he asked me where my best friend was, his old *kainuman*.

"We're not friends anymore," I replied. I made sure to look at him in the eye. Dad was appraising me again, that time without the anger. He nodded and continued to sip his beer for the rest of the night. In our quiet world of sidestepping, I was unsure of what he felt about his son breaking up with another man.

There was that one time, after I graduated from college, when I was sure of what he felt about me. I had just received an offer from a top-ranked advertising firm. I welcomed him home with the news. The reaction was something that I had not seen before: a hearty smile and a hug.

He asked me to sit down with him that night, without the shoe-shining kit. He talked to me about the campaigns that he created in a small-time agency during the nineties. He enjoyed the work, though the pay was too dismal for our family. In time, he had to move to a higher paying industry as our needs grew bigger.

After another late-night slog at a campaign for canned goods, I came home to find a pair of running shoes from him. He was worried about the overtime work that I was logging in. He wanted me to take up jogging in between writing scripts and television commercials. The shoes were a limited edition, top-of-the-line Adidas pair with reinforced mesh. They were gray, with streaks of pink.

"That's pink," I had pointed out, letting the implication speak for itself.

"Suits you," he had replied, his voice laced with mirth. His statement was acceptance wrapped in slight judgment. I felt good enjoying small victories.

The victory did not last long. I was found underperforming after six months, citing a lack of passion for the job fresh graduates would kill for. Dad and I never talked about it, other than his short text message saying that I should beg the creative director for my job back, then a second text saying that I did not know what I wanted in a job. I stopped using the shoes after being let go.

I dusted my leather shoes off and transitioned to another job, another industry. A month after I got fired again, I found myself in a start-up non-profit. I was tasked to find government funding at a time when a woman stole billions of taxpayers' money through nongovernment organizations.

Dad saw me shining my heavy, black brogues four months into the job. He asked me what the occasion was. I told him about the next day's meeting with a government official, a potential funder. In my best clothes and shiny shoes, I said goodbye to him the next morning. I did not miss the "Good luck!" and the pat on the back.

In a few months, Dad realized why I chose to work in an unstable company that had given itself a tall order. He heard the way that I talked on the phone to senior technocrats, projecting a much deeper voice so my youth would not betray me. He felt my absence on weekends when I had to do more work in the office. He saw the leather shoes that I shined for meetings. But the stress and commute took a toll. After arranging to rent a place with friends, I told my parents that I was moving out to the business district. There were questions, but they agreed. Dad was more reluctant than Mom.

Dad watched me zoom around the house, stuffing things into my bag, ticking off tasks on my list. He had little help to offer. I knew which clothes to bring, what boxes contained which shoes, how to pack them in the suitcase. On the day that I was set to move out, I recalled out loud all the shoes that I needed to bring.

"Your running shoes," Dad piped in. I told him that my running shoes were the first ones that I had moved in to the condo. I had started jogging again.

He offered to help me move in.

"Paul will drive me," I said, expecting a reaction from him. He just looked at me and nodded.

Paul was the third name that he has heard from me. In passing, I described Paul as a young financial analyst who attended the same high school he did

and the same university he has been working in. Like the man before Paul, I would introduce him to Dad. Maybe during dinner at home, maybe in another country where they allow a different kind of union. Maybe, if I dared to hope, even here in Manila, when we no longer have to fight for our place.

One day, maybe society would hand the right to us in a shiny box, just like how Dad gave me my first running shoes.

My phone beeped. The message was from Paul, letting me know that his car was parked outside.

I started slinging on bags. Dad grabbed the ones filled with shoeboxes. None of those shoes inside were from him anymore. Two were from well-meaning relatives, the rest I had bought myself. He saw me wear them on occasion: leather sneakers for casual Fridays, vulcanized high-cuts for the rainy season, sturdy tri-colored rubber shoes for field work.

He approved of them.