

Gatsby Wears Levi's

by Christine Faith Valdez Gumalal

My dad loves expensive clothing brands. He bought his first pair of Levi's when he got his first pay.

This, people would assume, stemmed from the lack of luxury he experienced during his childhood. But there is more to it than just that. He would rather own just one pair of Levi's than a dozen low quality jeans.

Dipolog, 1970

When he was only fourteen years old, my dad became the head of his family. Two successive deaths made him the caretaker of his mother and three younger siblings. His father (Jose), according to my lola, was stabbed multiple times by at least ten men because he wanted to build what could have been the first copra mill in their town. Later on, I'd learn that these men were members of the National People's Army. Later on, I'd also learn that it was because lolo Jose left a woman heartbroken (having learned that he was already married to my lola), and that woman happened to be the sister of the NPA's commander.

His eldest brother, Manolito, too young and too brave, joined the military to avenge their father only to be killed a month after. Both their deaths were accounted to the same rebel group.

Dad grew up in a town where relatives treated other members based on their status and the material things they own. Dad and his siblings ranked at the bottom because they wore nothing but relief clothes (*relip* or *ukay*) that lola had bought from the market. These clothes never fit them right. These were always too big and their color too pale, opposite to their cousins who were lavished with clothes from Dubai.

Dad's sisters did the laundry. And the contrast of their clothes was obvious: while their cousins' shirts hanged outstretched and clipped tightly to the rope, theirs were dumped in clumps and stacked sloppy on top of each bamboo pole.

I thought my dad, as a kid, surely must have complained about things. I was wrong.

Dad accepted his worn-out clothes and tattered childhood. He did not complain when they had to eat left-over food in the dirty kitchen, separated from their cousins. He explained to his younger siblings why they had to be really early for school and why they had to exchange torn pairs of slippers along the way.

But all these stories of misfortunes never came directly from dad.

I gathered them during our frequent November trips to his hometown in Dipolog City. These stories were dried divided seeds I loved to collect because then they were too tragic to be real. Because then they were only stories to pass while I sat on the bamboo floor full of lanzones and black ants that marched endlessly with time.

It was one of those harvest seasons when there were too many fruits and too many baskets to fill my afternoons. While my two younger brothers were busy helping the hired harvesters, learning first-hand the meaning of hard labour, I asked questions with the ardor of a young folklorist gathering what for me were distant stories.

Lola addressed these questions with snippets from her past. She began with the young and handsome Jose whom she never met until their wedding day. The man who turned out to be the father of her five children: Manolito, Leonardo, Ricardo, Rebecca, and Nemesia. The only husband she would take. Lola never lingered on drama, so no matter how sad the piece of story was, it would appear like a comedy, if not, a story of hope for me.

On our drive back to Cagayan de Oro City, my dad was surprised when I relayed some of these stories. While my mom calculated our time of arrival (and whether we should stop by to grab dinner in Iligan) and my two younger brothers munched their way through the big box of fruits on board, I confessed how I managed to know that when they were teenagers, my dad and uncle joined a local cult (more like a gang) that claimed immortality by eating shards of glass, and how a minute close to doing the most stupid decision in their lives, they were saved by my lola's maniacal beating.

Or the time when my dad patiently squatted near the rice thresher to gather the bitter bran for their meal, until one rice shell went inside his eye. Lola blew hard to remove the shell that had already sunk its way inside dad's eye. She begged God to spare my dad from blindness, her fingers trembling while repeating the sign of the cross. God heard her and she became a devoted Christian.

A small scar on my father's left eye is the only remembrance of that day.

Marawi, 1980

But many invisible scars followed.

The only redemption from hardship he considered was to enter college and graduate as an engineer. He passed as a full-time scholar of Mindanao State University and kept a clear vision of the future he dreamt of: to be established and to never go back to where he was.

He was Gatsby even before I met Fitzgerald in my undergraduate literature class. But like Gatsby, my dad had his fair share of secrets, too.

And secrets were the currency of the silenced 70s.

Marcos ruled the country in the 70s up until the late 80s. Dad's future, along with the many, did not count much. Together with his fellow MSU-ans, dad joined the academic boycotts and learned life's lessons outside the classroom. Many were with him in the streets. Freedom was the only thing that mattered. Finally, Cory won. And dad lost his scholarship.

The expired revolutionary Engineering major, would either pay his full tuition and continue his academics, or go back to Katipunan, his hometown, and sow the field. With the pressure of having to go home weighting his shoulders, my dad stood at the golf course, facing the stillness of Lake Lanao. The golf course was no different from his family's land. The same land that produced copra.

More than two decades later, I would be in a similar position. I was standing on a rooftop in one of Cebu's dormitories with the same desperation. Having been fired from my first job, I was alone with nothing left in my account but the senseless pride of leaving home. The stillness of the city's landscape was suffocating.

So was the fog that covered the pine trees of Marawi, enchanting young minds to dream of the future. A future that dad did not want to give up.

Dad had to double his work load to pay for his tuition. He was accepted to work part-time as a dishwasher at a dormitory. It was managed by an agriculture professor who was known for his four single *Ilokana* daughters. The eldest of the four was mom.

Dad was blessed with three things: brain, spirit, and charm. The third made him popular with the tenants, most especially with the ladies. It did not take long before he started dating mom. Mom, then a Filipino education major, not only found a boyfriend, but also a private Math tutor. Dad found his reason.

There was, however, the obvious gap in their status. Mom was a Valdez after all. Her family owned the lands that they farmed. Dad's only property was the copra mill that was never realized. Their relationship was branded the Shawee-Gabby love team and personified Sharon Cuneta's famous 80s song *Tubig at Langis*.

But dad had already decided to marry my mother.

It always appeared to me that introducing my future fiancée to my dad would not be a problem given the circumstance he had back then; yet I have been engaged for almost five years now and dad knows nothing about it.

They did marry, right after dad convinced my mom's family that he would become a licensed engineer; and that he would also give her more than the Tamaraw FX that the other suitor promised. I smile every time I see a picture of me as a baby held by my dad, in his toga beside my mom. The vastness of the MSU golf course fills the background.

Getting his license was an elusive thing. Dad was already teaching as a part-time instructor when he started his review for the board exam. During daytime, he taught disinterested engineering majors. At noon, he dealt with death threats from failing seniors. At night, he studied for his board and was in-charge of getting me to sleep. Mom told me that dad used to read his reviewer out loud while carrying me in one arm. I had heard of circuit theorems first before fables and fairy tales.

Dad never got any result, whether pass or fail, from the first board exam. No one in that batch did. All the test papers were burnt in a fire, which the examiners said was an "accident." Dad would have left his dreams to die like the extinguished flame had he not met mom. With his wife, plus the baby, dad brushed off the ashes of despair, determined to do the exam all over again.

This time the examiners made sure to keep the test papers safe. Dad had his result the second time around.

He passed.

Cagayan de Oro, 1990

Fuelled by his license, dad started working for Cagayan Electric Power and Light Company, Incorporation (CEPALCO). He had to temporarily leave us again.

He rented a room that could hardly be called a box. It was a small extension outside his landlord's house. It was an oven during day-time, and any air left was unbreathable since it was situated next to a piggery. The area was too crowded and privacy was a stranger. During the third month, dad's first pair of Levi's was stolen. He left a month after.

In 1996, my dad moved all of us to Cagayan de Oro City, the City of Golden Friendship. Starting a family in a new city, far from any relatives, was tough, but I could not remember a day that dad and mom fought about money. Nobody complained.

I do remember the extra time dad set to teach me the fundamentals of mathematics. I was just in grade school but my notes were already filled with Xs and Ys. One evening I challenged dad to solve a hundred raised to its hundredth form; I was not in the mood to deal with exponential equations so I handed him the pen. He solved the problem at the back of a scratch paper and wrote zeroes after zeroes for almost an hour.

That night I learned that my dad was a very determined man.

All of us were provided with our basic needs. Christmas shopping was very crucial. Any “expensive” item, be it a clothing or a toy, was chosen carefully because it had to last a year. When I said I wanted a new pair of shoes, dad sat on one of those fitting chairs and scrutinized the leather’s authenticity. He held the shoes in his hand, confirmed if it was along the price range that we agreed, and traced the pattern of the welt and the lining. He was focused on the soles and the heels, and had me walk the shoes. I felt like I was auditioning and the grand prize was the new shoes. I won the prize and had to own them for two years.

It would sound funny, but dad knows more about clothing material than mom.

Mom was there to help choose the design. But dad was always the final QA. From my high school prom pumps to my college graduation heels and dress, even my teenaged Chuck Taylor’s craze, he always checked the quality. He insisted on buying me an executive leather bag before I left for my first job in Cebu City.

I am already in my mid-twenties yet my dad and mom still tag along whenever I shop.

Just two weeks ago, mom and I ransacked most of the boutiques in the mall looking for a hosting dress. “Let’s just call your dad, he’s better at this.” Mom said, giving up. The sales lady from Bettina was curious when dad entered the store and started to check our pre-selected dresses. Even if he had enough money to carelessly purchase things, dad was still insistent on quality.

My dad is already the vice-president of CEPALCO. He is almost 50 now and his closet might be filled with Levi’s, M&S, Nautica and what have you, but the vision that he had, like his father’s copra mill, of being established and moving as far as he can from that bitter bran of poverty is still to be accomplished.

This vision, after all, is no longer just about him. He has to make sure that not even one of his three children would experience squatting next to a rice shredder again. All three of us, especially me, should be settled.

By his terms, to be settled means to provide corporate jobs for both his sons. Ideally he would have to train one to take over his career as an engineer. And as for me, his *unica hija*, he should see to it that he will walk me down that aisle.

To fulfil a part of that vision, Dad would have to buy perhaps the most expensive dress he could buy for me. But I know that the most expensive dress is the hardest one to wear. And I may not be able to wear it at all.

Unless the day will come that two daughters, both wearing the most beautiful dresses, can be walked down the aisle by each of their dads. Unless the day will come when I can properly enunciate the name Dawn instead of Don. Unless the day will come that I will have my dad read this.

But I am determined to wait.