

Jackets from Grandpa

By Alejandro Lucero

I still have the jacket I bought 6 years ago from Fabian. A black zip-up hoodie. The one with a Jumpman logo over the left breast. The one I bought with dissolving graduation money. It is cloaked over a plastic hanger, behind long-sleeved henleys and jeans, in the closet I share with my wife. Fabian sold it to for me for sixty dollars. Money he used to buy a batch of coke for the group.

“Call Emile. Ask her if she has friends to bring over,” Fab’ would say. “Tell her we’re going to play in the snow.”

The high school graduation money deposited into my Wells Fargo bank account by my generous grandparents was dwindling.

I wore that hoodie the last time I went to visit my grandfather; the vanilla scent of Emile’s lotion or perfume already sunken into its fibers, its DNA. There were plastic tubes connected to my grandfather's nose. His eyes were closed. The white hairs of his light scruffy beard blanketed a hollow mouth and high pointed cheek-bones. I pulled the black sleeves over my hands and squeezed the cotton as tight as I could while my eyes fixated on his face. His mouth looked dry as if his throat was squeezing the moisture from his tongue, as if they weren’t bothering to feed or water him anymore. Dad and I stood aside. My father's hands, almost black from years of sun, gripped the plastic bed rail. The only sounds were the beeping of expensive equipment afforded by insurance and the sniffles I tried to make sound natural, or as if they were accompanied with tears; I didn’t know at the time that was goodbye.

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Everything around me looked surreal: heaps of endless snow over our alfalfa meadows, our dirt road escaping out to the highway, and our row of single-wide trailer homes lined up like powdered pound cakes on display at a bakery.

The strong gusts of northern winds would create snowdrifts, some five feet high, hills of white dust no sweater with a hood could shield. The sun sharply shining through the top of the sober grey sky; we would have been blinded without sun shades. I had only a few hours before tip-off.

It took the whole family to dig a path on our hundred-yard road of dirt. I was a high school freshman playing on a basketball team that would cut me if I missed a game. My coaches were always looking for reasons to reduce their rosters. I was also very fortunate. Both grandma and grandpa, wearing big winter coats and scarves wrapped around their nose, mouth, and throats, helped Dad and me shovel through the feet of snow to clear our dirt road enough for our 94' Mercury Topaz to get out onto the conveniently snow plowed highway. Thanks to the bed of my grandfather's well-stocked pickup truck, we each had a snow shovel. With his bald head heated by the flannel lined hood of his large coat, my grandpa would burrow through the snow like a starved gopher. He would work as hard and fast as he could for about ten minutes at a time. Then, he would take a couple of moments to let the energy in his blood power the muscles of his short, slender frame. Even then, more than a thousand nights before he slept on his deathbed, his body was small. More fragile than a wine glass.

All I was wearing, for protection from the weather, was my Cardinals basketball hoodie, a jacket that proved I had earned a place on the team. A fiery fierce redbird from the peak of a

tornado twirling a basketball on its feathered finger. The bold red letters of my high school, *Robertson*, began to collect flakes of snow around their edges.

The chilled wind swirled its air through our sinuses, shooting up our noses like the cocaine I would snort with all that graduation money, our faces frozen into smiles as we cleared the road together. After three hours, my young body taking on the brunt of the work, I was freezing in droplets of my own sweat. Dad got in his little white car, and after giving his “old girl” a few minutes to warm up, backed out and gave our own plow job a test drive. Our efforts paid off. Dad drove onto the highway, made a quick U-turn, and accelerated back down our shoveled dirt road. He left the engine running as he stepped out. I can still smell the slight aroma of rotten eggs beating out of the exhaust.

“Alright, Alejandro,” said my father. “Tell grandma and grandpa thank you. Then go get your duffle bag from inside so we can leave.”

“Thanks for helping us dig out,” I told my grandparents. “I’m going to score ten points for each of you tonight!”

A murmur of words, mostly in Spanish, came from my grandpa as his scrawny leg kicked some excess powder off his shovel. Snow stuck to the toe of his tan boot making his foot look comically like an ice cream cone. The only one I caught was my name as always. I think back, wishing I had demanded an interpretation. I was good then, like I am now, and had good things to say to my grandfather. My grandmother, who spoke fine English, wished us a safe trip and I watched the two of them trek back home across the snow-covered field as I sat in the passenger seat of my dad's car.

“Your grandpa said you’re a hard worker,” my dad told me as we pulled out of our road. The heater in his old car blew out cold air, and the wet cuffs of my hoodie began to stiffen like rigor mortis. “He’s never given me that compliment,” he said with a laugh.

All I wanted at 14 was to play basketball. All I want now is a chance to talk to my grandfather. I had never picked up a cigarette or a joint, never took a sip from that dusty Bacardi bottle in the liquor closet, and, especially, never imagined snorting soft lines of snow off Emile’s vanilla neck. During the summer months following freshman year, I would play pickup games with friends like Fabian for hours outside of Paul D. Henry Elementary. Now one of many closed *Las Vegas City Schools*. The edges of the concrete court were lined with tall pine trees. When the sun would be completely replaced by darkness we would sit on our backpacks, or jackets if we brought one, to protect our legs from the pine needles that would shed and accumulate beneath the biggest tree at center court. We drank water out of reused Gatorade bottles and talked about who was going to play for what team in the NBA and which major shoe company we would sign contracts with. Fabian, with hope bleeding through his blue eyes, was going to be sponsored by *Jordan* and wear the purple and gold mesh of the *Los Angeles Lakers*. I still remember that summer break. I still remember basketball and friends turning into cocaine and girls. I still remember wishing I was a better grandson.

Now, my calves are still swollen from the endless amount of basketball played growing up. They bulge through my tube socks like rich kids’ stockings at Christmas time. I don’t remember if I got my grandparents those 20 points I promised. I only remember the time with my family, the shovels cutting through heavy snow, and how the beautiful winter breeze burned

my chest through the printed letters of my school name. I can still feel the skin over my lungs turn red when I exhale.

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A heath of dried alfalfa, begging to be bailed, binds us together. My grandfather and I always shared that patch of weather-beaten land with its barbed wire fencing us off from the rest of Sapello, New Mexico, from the rest of the constantly changing world. However, we kept to ourselves, standing just a couple hundred steps away from one another over cold crusted soil. That's when I wore the big puffy jacket. A hand-me-down from grandpa. I was ten years old, a 5th grader, and my infatuation of basketball had begun to burn beyond control after watching Derek Fisher, a *Laker* at the time, sink a game-winning shot with 0.4 seconds on the clock live on T.V.

The puffy hand-me-down had worn out wrists cuffs with grime etched into the ruffled wrinkles of the elastic stretch. The logo on the back was a vicious long-beaked duck with a set of teeth chomping down on a corn cob pipe. I would wear that jacket when playing basketball outside on the hoop my dad and grandpa put together for me. Across the field my grandfather would be splitting pine wood for fires, working on perfecting the quality of his vegetable garden, or laying on a piece of cardboard tinkering with the hardware beneath his red Chevrolet pickup truck that must have been originally assembled somewhere in Michigan in the '60s. I wondered if he would ever watch me play from the other side of that field.

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The last time I tried on my grandpa's puffy jacket, before giving it to a small framed friend, those charmingly blemished cuffs rode nearly up to my elbows when I forced my wide frame completely through the torso, stretching out the body of the duck on my back.

My grandmother would be disappointed with me if she had known I donated a memento of his, but I'd like to think he would be happy it was still being appreciated and used. I'd like to think he would be happy with a lot of the decisions I've made since he passed away. Happy that I dropped the powder. Happy I picked up a new understanding of life.

My grandfather has been gone for 6 years, but I sometimes sit in the dark and speak to him out loud. I pull on the loose threads of my new henley sweaters and tell him how I'm married to a woman whose body I tightly hold every night as he held my grandmother, one who loves me past blurred lines of cocaine, and how the sense of pride after he complimented my work ethic has stuck with me as if it were a clever nickname.

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During my grandfather's last days, I made most of my visits to the hospital with my dad. I saw firsthand what losing a father looks like.

There was no hand holding till the last breath, no immaculate set of last words exchanged, no "I never told you this before" moment. There was lots of time that went unfilled. Lots of painful silence. Lots of fogged out memories filtered through the strainers in our brains. If I had known I was looking at my grandpa alive for the last time, at my father with his father for the last time, if I could have seen his death coming or acknowledged the inevitability of it sooner, maybe I wouldn't have been wasting money and health on blow or time with Emile, who is now a stranger.

I put my hand on the wall of my apartment and feel its chill and then speak into the empty air. “Gracias” the only Spanish word I know. I tell my grandfather thank you for all the memories of shoveling dirt roads clean, of the plot of land where our homes set anchor in a sea of alfalfa, and of all the protective layers he provided for me over our 18 years together. When winter comes. When big flakes of snow flutter, scatter, and relax along my window sill. That’s how I’ll know he’s visiting me.