

READING

The Wooden Shoes

Cassania, a 17-year-old student in Boston who emigrated from Haiti after the earthquake there in 2010, wrote this story about the legacy embodied in a pair of wooden shoes.

On January 12, 2010, an earthquake devastated the small island of Haiti. As the earth shook, people were running all over the streets, trying to find a secure place. I saw a house that had fallen into pieces and plenty of people lying dead on the streets—some without a head, arm, or leg. My grandma and I had to leave quickly, so we only had time to take the most important things. I grabbed our cell phones. She grabbed a pair of yellow wooden shoes, but then we decided to leave them in the next room, and we went off.

Two days after my tenth birthday, April 23, my grandfather gave me a pair of yellow wooden shoes. They were the weirdest shoes that I'd ever seen in my life. Aside from being yellow, they were enormous, shiny, and had large beaks. They also had flower designs on each side. They were very clean, therefore they always had the smell of a newly bought thing. At first, I hated that pair of shoes because they weren't my style and they were not the kind of birthday gift that I wanted. When he gave me the shoes, I accepted them, but it was not a sincere acceptance. I threw them under my bed and went off. How could a ten-year-old girl love a weird pair of yellow shoes? However, my grandfather never gave up. He was extremely persistent and wanted me to know the story behind them, which he was truly proud of. I did not know how significant the shoes were until I sat down and listened to all the struggles that he had to go through.

My grandfather Fanis Julson was born in the Dominican Republic. When he was just about seventeen years old, his parents and he moved to Haiti. This wasn't easy for him because he had to leave his friends and family behind, and he had to start adapting himself to a new culture, a new life. But Grandpa Fanis was strong enough to carry his own weight. He was extremely strict with his family, but when he was with his friends he was eager to have fun. He was compassionate, loved without limits, and appreciated even the smallest things in life. Since I was a little girl, people have always compared me to him because we share the same characteristics. He could never trick my mom or me, his own blood.

My grandpa used to live in the rural areas of Haiti. There was always a big lack of money in the family. About a year or so after my grandpa got married to my grandmother, Leonie Camille, things weren't going as well as he planned. Their three children were getting

seriously sick. So everyday for fifteen years, he worked two jobs. He has worked as a salesman, but his primary job was being a comedian. He enjoyed entertaining people. He used to wake up at 5:00 a.m. every day, put his wooden shoes on, then go tell stories or act in a play for a certain family. Even when he got paid little money, it was enough to put food on the table for his family.

After hearing this intriguing story, I broke into tears. I went to my grandpa and gave him the biggest hug ever. He worked so hard to provide for the woman that he loved.

I decided to use these shoes for my project. I was so excited. I went home and asked Grandma about the shoes, but she did not answer me. She looked as scared as my cat Mickey whenever he hears a thunderstorm. She has an innocent look, whenever she does anything wrong, you always know because she looks nervous. Having the feeling that she didn't hear me, I asked her the question once again, and that's when she told me that the shoes disappeared. I couldn't believe my ears. I was frustrated. I asked her, "How come you never told me this before, *poukisa?*" (Why?)

Grandma replied, "I didn't want to see the reaction that I'm seeing right now."

"But grandma what happened? When did this happen? *Pale avek mwen!* (Talk to me!)" I said angrily.

She responded, "Calm down honey, one question at a time." Tears started coming down her eyes. Her crying was contagious. I wanted to cry, too, but I couldn't because my anger was stronger than my tears.

I never truly knew why Grandpa Fanis gave me the yellow wooden shoes. After what I had to go through, I realized that a gift is not about its physical appearance, but about how meaningful it is to you. Although the shoes aren't physically with me, they are mentally a part of me. The shoes are meaningful to me because, first, they were a gift from the most admirable man in my life. Secondly, the shoes were the tools that Grandpa Fanis used to keep his family from falling apart. They remind me of how many sacrifices, struggles, and efforts he made to provide for his family in a country where you have to be thankful and appreciate everything given to you. When a gift is so important, such as the shoes are to me, the only way that I can express myself is by writing about it.¹

¹ Cassania Gilson, "Wooden Shoes," in *I Want You to Have This: A Collection of Objects and Their Stories from Around the World*, written by eleventh graders from Boston International High School (Boston, MA: 826 Boston, 2013), 94–97. Reproduced by permission of 826 Boston.