

Composite Pops

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How does a fatherless boy spell *father*?

One answer is in the video of a poet who monologues about a dream in which he's a child contestant in a spelling bee. For the win, he has to spell the word *father*. He proceeds to spell the word *m-o-t-h-e-r*. Then when the spellmaster says he's "incorrect," he launches into a rant about absentee fathers and womanizing men and maternal strength . . .

While plenty mothers in the world deserve the most huge hurrahs, what I want to say to this poet and other like minds is this: no matter how much we lambast men and high-note praise women, a woman maketh a father not.

Yes, ours is indeed a revolutionary era of gender fluidness and sexual equality and girls doubtless need dads too—I repeat: girls need their dads. No way no how no day would I try to diminish or worse negate the role of a dad in his daughter's life. No one, and that includes humans, saints, and extraterrestrials, could convince me that my princess's life would be better off without me in it. However, just as there are some aspects of being a female that my daughter's mother is more equipped to guide her through, there are aspects of

being a male that I hope I have helped my son navigate in a way that only I could.¹

This is my beating heart: boys need fathers.

Boys need fathers—period, exclamation point.

And if a boy is not blessed with a father or gifted with a dynamic stand-in then he must find ways to make one. He must identify the *fatherish* men in his life, find what he needs from them, and compose one.

It is an act of necessity, and I should know. My mother was not far along into her nineteenth year when she had me by a man who lived no more than a bike ride away but was absent for my first decade of life.² To say I had no father, though, is a half-truth. To say my mother was my father would be a sentimental-ass lie. I had a father, and I had one because I made one. Or rather I composed a father from the men at hand, brothers who kept me long before Obama made it a project.³

There was my mother's long-term boyfriend Big Chris, my maternal grandfather Sam, my maternal uncle Anthony, my paternal uncle Henry, and at long last my biological father, Wesley. If you asked me to spell *father*, I could turn their names into one long-ass portmanteau.

Or I might just say “p-o-p-s.”

Pops was a group of men who provided a loving example of what it would soon enough mean to be a man. Pops nurtured me. Bestowed me with his wisdom. Pushed me to nuance the way I saw the world. He inspired me to dream. He tended my harms. He made sure I knew it was in me to surpass him.

BIG CHRIS

Far as I knew growing up my biological father was a ghost by the time I was born. By the time I was a year old, my mother had been heart-throbbled by a man named Big Chris. Big Chris was a recent parolee—bank robbery, what a dreamer!—and a neophyte/soon-to-be-prosperous pimp, but also a smart, witty, compassionate man whose jokes could give you stomachaches. My mother had two boys by Big Chris and stayed with him until just before I reached double digits. For years after he left, he would swing through trying to rekindle his and my mother's faded love or else connect with his boys, and without a doubt, whether Big Chris and my mom were an official couple or not, I was one of those boys. The man never treated me one bit different from the sons of his seed. The naysayers can knock how he hustled his bread and meat, but that don't change the fact that Big Chris was the one who showed me the value and impact of a father's love, that family often had nothing to do with genetics. This was a lesson he taught me in life and in death.

In September 2009, I got a call from Big Chris's daughter—my oldest sister—saying that he was sick and that I should fly out to Phoenix to see him. In the span of a few days, she went from prodding me to make it out soon, to imploring me to come ASAP if I wanted to see him alive. The next day I was on a flight, bracing for the worst and praying against it. My flight landed heartstroke hours later and while pas-

sengers were grabbing their bags, I turned on my cell phone to a fusillade of texts: from my mother, from my brothers, from my sister—all warning me Big Chris had died. My big sister picked me up from the airport, and tried to console me with Dad's near-to-last words: "I've got to hold on. I've got to hold on so I can see Mitch." The story didn't console me in the moment, but later, much later, when the grief begrudged me room to breathe, Dad's near-to-last words confirmed for me the bond that we'd shared, reaffirmed that I would forever be one of his boys, that our kinship was deeper than DNA.

SAM

My maternal grandfather, Sam Jackson, Jr., rose every day for thirty-plus years to go to the same job. He attends church every Sunday—and arrives on time all the time. He pays his bills and his tithes. He represents at neighborhood rallies and community meetings. He bought and has lived in the same house since the '70s, lived there with his wife until she died, lives there with a new wife now. Granddad or Dad, as I call him, rescued us—my mom and her boys—countless times with funds because the electric company put an apartment of ours on eclipse or the rent had somehow vamoosed out of my mom's purse. Granddad moved me into his house for my last two years of high school, this after I ran away from my biological father's house, after I'd made it clear to all concerned adults that I couldn't be trusted

under the charge of my half-paralyzed great-grandmother. Me, Granddad, and my cousin-brother Jesse ate breakfast together in his kitchen damn near every weekday.⁴ Granddad sat in the bleachers at my home and away high school hoop games and kept full stats. He chided me to mow the lawn and take out the trash and repaid me by spotting me the bucks I needed to hang with my homeboys on Friday nights. He never once bemoaned being my caretaker, as I imagined he had a right to, not even after he had to slap spit from me for the class-A house crime of sneaking girls into my basement bedroom.⁵ Granddad has modeled what it means to be a stand-up dude, what it means to honor your commitments, what it means to shoulder your obligations and your burdens without gripe.

ANTHONY (ANT)

My maternal uncle Ant wore some version of a Jheri curl well past the great epoch of Jheri curls. Furthermore, Ant's held on to his almost-a-high-school-All-American story for generations, a legend I've heard told so often at family dinners, that sometimes I go ahead and tell it myself. Let Ant or me tell it, the judges clocked him at 9.7, 9.6, and 9.5 in the 100-yard sprint at a district track meet, but if they had given him an official time of 9.5 instead of 9.6, he "would've been an All-American that year."

Ant's story is a tendon to what happened to me in sixth grade, the only year I ever competed on a track team. That

year, I'd taken second place in the district meet to a rival who had been putting a whooping on me all season. Ant attended that meet and was disappointed right along with me. He could've let me play a defeatist, but instead he took it upon himself to train me for the city championship, swooping me afternoons after school and teaching me to run on my toes and lean forward and lengthen my stride, drilling into my porous brain the idea that I could beat anyone as long as I used good form and believed. The championships rolled around a couple of weeks later and sure enough I was lined up against my rival in the 100-meter final. Pow! We took off and by midway through the race I was losing in slo-mo and heard my heart scream no, no, nooooooooooooo. Then by some kind of Prefontaine magic I heard Ant screaming, "REACH, nephew! REACH!" above all other voices, and reach I did on the way to winning the race with a slight cushion. You should have seen Ant afterward, rejoicing as if, at once, I'd won Olympic gold and salved his All-American wound. Thanks to Ant, I had my first taste of being a champion in public, of realizing that with assiduousness and self-confidence, my impossible was possible. For sure he was a father that day, one who'd pushed me to succeed where he'd failed, to be bolder, bigger, stronger, best.

HENRY

Somewhere in my random collection of family archives is a hubris-building copy of a news feature on my paternal

uncle Henry titled, "Superman in Solitary: Oregon's Biggest Dope Dealer Tells All." The story details Uncle Henry's 1970s to mid-'80s evolution from car thief and pimp to drug kingpin. The article was straight-up inspiration, though, full disclosure, I didn't know Uncle Henry at all during the days of him hustling enough funds to buy a plane and Rolls-Royce. In fact, we spent almost no time together until right after I graduated high school, which was the summer I decided that being a devoted part-time dope dealer was the best present way for me to make a living. Keep in mind, this was decades past Uncle Henry's gilded heyday, well into the age of him being a shyster and ardent addict, and though I knew about his fall, I was beguiled by the lore, was hungry to profit from secrets I was sure he owned. So one day my older brother—a fellow neophyte dope dealer—and me tracked down Uncle Henry at the apartment of another uncle and pressed him for what in effect was a session of Drug Dealing 101. Uncle Henry, ever the capitalist, obliged us a lesson for a few shards of our dope. Can't recall everything he said, but one point will stick with me till I'm dust: "The fast nickel beats the slow twenty." My uncle went on to explain that while we waited forever for a twenty sale, we could've sold umpteen fives, which meant to me that what I dreamed of would not arrive in a windfall but would accrue one small sale at a time. It's easy to make the case that Uncle Henry was undermining my brother and me, but the way I see it, his advice had less to do with corrupting our youth or sabotaging our gleaming futures, and more to do with the munificence of exposing us to a maxim that had grand effect

for him. Because he knew that no matter what we did, we would need to learn how to hustle—to reimagine paths to success—that hustling was vital to young black boys, that without it we were destined to be failed black men. Though I never made hundreds of thousands nor had the misfortune of being the local drug kingpin, Uncle Henry's lecture and legacy helped convince me that I had hustle in my blood, and please believe me when I tell you, I've been a hustler ever since.

WESLEY

Ten—that's how old I was when I met my biological father. One of my most significant memories of him occurred not too long after when his wife, oldest son, two daughters, and I road-tripped to visit Disneyland, Sea World, and a few Californian family members. One of those relatives lived in an apartment complex with a pool—a pool! We all changed into swimming gear and headed out to the pool, where my dad and my brother and sisters began having a grand old time swimming and playing in the water and goading me to get in while I gallivanted *around* the pool and at most teased my foot in the shallow end once or twice. My trepidation was for good reason as this was circa '85, arguably the height of a certain highwater-pants and rhinestone-glove-wearing pop star, and I had a Jheri curl befitting a kid who claimed to certain credulous classmates that I was a not-so-distant cousin. Or let me put it like this: young

Mitch Jackson was not about to get his MJ-esque dew wet nor—the extent of my swimming skills at the time was a hell-a-weak doggy paddle—was I about to risk my life. But my biological father flexed contrary designs by creeping up behind me and scooping me in the air and tossing me in the pool. He didn't flinch while I flailed and screamed and gulped mouthfuls of overchlorinated water. He said something to me that I can't remember but that my subconscious must've heard because soon I calmed and got my curly head above the surface, and stayed in the pool and had a damn good day frolicking with my father, brother, and sisters—aka the Johnsons. The message of that day took years to reveal itself to me: "Troubled water or not, you best learn to swim. 'Cause when your young-ass get to drowning, I may not be moved to rescue." That message, by the way, I now count as an act of stern beneficence.

Not one of the men I mentioned has existed in my life beyond the reach of critique. Oh yes, I comprehend flaws. But their foibles weren't the crux of what I used to build. I must say, too, that they were much more than mentors. Mentors teach you a skill. Fathers teach you to live. Your mentor's role can remain static. Your father's role must evolve. A mentor's direction might be free of deep feeling. A father's guidance must be rooted in love.

Who I am now is who I must be: a flawed human striving to live in a state of becoming. Along the way I've discovered a thing or more about myself: that who and how I

love is not dictated by law or blood, that being a constant presence is as much a part of being a man as almost anything else, that what I want must be earned, that I can win and win I will, that there's hustle in my genes, that either I swim or drown and there is no one more important to that outcome than me.

Now here I am the father of two children, trying my all-out damnedest to mind the lessons of my beloved composite, all the while feeling encouraged by the fact I know they're rooting for me to best the job they did.

Thank. You. Pops.



1. Praise be to the gender politicians. By male and female I mean cisgendered male and female—the Latin prefix *cis* means “on the same side”—i.e., men and women whose gender identity is aligned with the gender they were assigned by birth.

2. For my DNA dad's sake, I must note that the absoluteness of his early absence is a point of dispute.

3. Obama (BO) is the latest exemplar—a total of twelve were either abandoned or lost their biological fathers when they were young—of a president whose life confirms how efficacious it is to compose a composite. It's damn near folklore now, how Barack Hussein Obama, Sr., had bounced on his wife and BO by the time he was a toddler, how his mother spent time in Seattle, remarried in Hawaii, took young BO to live with her new husband in Indonesia, but sent him back to the Aloha State to live with her parents around the time he entered the fifth grade. One of BO's composites thereafter, if nothing else for the fact that he assumed the role of his long-term primary caretaker until he went off to college, was his maternal grandfather Stanley Dunham (no shade to Stanley's wife's role in co-parenting her grandson). Stanley was also the one who introduced BO to the man who just might own the

title of Most Controversial of all presidential composites: a libertine, ex-journalist, poet, and Communist associate named Frank Marshall Davis, a man who became especially infamous during BO's first campaign when conspiracy theorists claimed Davis was his biological father. The truth, though, as confirmed by BO in his memoir, is that Davis helped shape his views on racial identity, race relations, and social justice. Davis was a part of BO's life but for a handful of years, but I'm calling him a composite for his impact. For example, though this next point may be a stretch (then again, so was a black man being elected the leader of the free world), remnants of Davis's radical thought can be found in the socialist-leaning legislation that is Obama Care. From the last to the first. George Washington (GW) lost his father, Augustine (Augustine's people called him Gus), when he was eleven. From that point, GW's older half-brother Lawrence Washington became his surrogate father. Answer me this: What would America look like if GW hadn't followed Lawrence into the military and politics (Lawrence fought in the War of Jenkins Ear and was later elected to Virginia's House of Burgesses)? Lawrence christened the Mount Vernon estate (or should we call it a plantation?), and GW paid homage to his beloved older brother when it was in his sole possession by hanging only his portrait in his study. GW and BO are notable for being the first and last, but the list between them includes Thomas Jefferson (TJ), who lost his father at thirteen and found a mentor in the philosophy professor William Small when he entered William and Mary College a few years later. Smith fostered in TJ a great appreciation for diverse disciplines and also a love of Enlightenment thinkers. He also introduced TJ to the politician and law professor George Wythe—the man who became TJ's unofficial political and cultural mentor—as much a composite as any man was for the future president. How amazing it must've been for an ambitious young TJ to sit around a supper table discussing politics and culture with Small, Wythe, and a governor. How fortunate TJ was to have been given the chance to later study law (there were no law schools in colonial America) with Wythe, and have that apprenticeship that included history,

philosophy, and ethics. If you're looking for the lasting influence of TJ's composite, you need look no further than the ideals and language of the most important document in American history. The list of presidents who built composites also includes Gerald Ford (GF)—he was born Leslie King, Jr.—whose mother, Dorothy, divorced his biological father, Leslie King, Sr., on the grounds of “extreme cruelty” when her son was five months old. GF's biological father was the son of the millionaire businessman Charles Henry King, but that didn't stop him from bolting out of state (so much for broke pockets being the impetus for a deadbeat dad) and, as rumor had it, colluding with his father to skirt alimony and child-support judgments. Lucky for baby GF that Dorothy met Gerald Ford, Sr., a couple of years later. Ford Sr. wasn't no slouch. He became a successful businessman, was a church vestryman, a Mason, and later a local politician. He married Dorothy, adopted her young son, christened him a junior, and was, in GF's words, “kind, fair, and firm.” Ford Sr. and Dorothy, who had three more boys together, didn't mention to GF that Ford Sr. was not his biological father. GF didn't find that out until his biological father showed up at his high school job. But years and years later, in a letter GF dictated from the Oval Office, you can see how that visit did little to change his mind about his beloved composite: “I loved and was guided in life by the only father I ever had—Gerald R. Ford Sr. There was never any longing on my part to seek family outside of the one in which I was raised with such love, tenderness, and happiness.”

4. When my cousin-brother Jesse's mother was murdered, he went to live with my great-grandparents for a time, but when he hit the first grade, he moved in with my granddad and lived with him until he became a legal adult. My granddad parenting Jesse is yet another hashmark in the ledger of why he deserves my love, respect, and admiration.

5. The backstory: this occurred after I'd been caught on occasion with naked to half-naked girls in my basement bedroom. The scene: my granddad's house sits beside an alley, and there's a park bench at the opening of the alley. The action: this particular day

my granddad came home early from work and spotted me sitting on that park bench with a girl whose name I couldn't name now if you paid me, but whose face I will never forget. By sitting I mean that I was leaned into her ear whispering the sweet nothings I hoped would lead to her knickknacks. She and I had not been in the house, though, so I was miffed when my granddad stopped his Buick in the alley and furied over to us. "Hey, Dad, this is—" and before I could finish, he barked, "What did I tell you?! What did I tell you about this?!" and slapped the sound of a firework out of my cheek. He breathed over me for a moment or two and stomped back to his idling ride and meandered it into the garage. The girl's mouth was agape when I got up the courage to look at her. You should go, I said. She shook her head yes. You should go now, I said, and she rose and headed up the alley. She and I never spoke another word to each other after that day. These years later, I realize it was a testament to how much I love my granddad that it never dawned on me to curse him under my breath or consider running away like I damn sure would've if instead it was my DNA dad who'd struck me. Pretty sure I never snuck another girl into the basement either—which spells mission accomplished for Sam Jackson, Jr., excuse me, mission accomplished for Dad.