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## *Chapter 1*

# RECEIPTS FROM DAD

**T**he earliest image I have of my father is not some grandiose recollection. In fact, I don't even know why my mind has chosen to hold on to it, as if it were some rare antique. It's the mid-1970s, and I am in the back seat of our Matador, distracted by my Star Wars action figures. Mama is in the front with a blue polyester outfit on, gazing out of her window—and I promise you she looks exactly the same now as she did on that day some forty years ago. As my auntie would say, “Good black don't crack.” I feel the car start to slow down, and my father has turned on his signal, indicating he wants to turn. But there's a problem, the same problem he always encountered when he tried to check the rearview mirror to know whether it was really safe to turn. I

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look up from my Han Solo figure to catch my dad gently tapping my mother and asking her to tilt her head to the right. Without protest, she obliges, and now with her “Angela Davis” Afro out of the way, Dad looks into the mirror. Our eyes meet. He gives me the same wink he always did, accompanied by a wide smile betraying his imperfect teeth, which years later he would get capped. I smile back and then return to Han.

I’ve always been baffled by the receipts my mind has chosen to hold on to. Why do I remember that smile, those teeth, that mid-1970s drive, but can’t remember a single word during our trip? I see those same teeth a decade later when he gave me “the talk,” and yet I don’t remember what he said. And when I preached my first sermon—a really bad sermon—his smile was there a few rows back, holding my mother’s hand, beaming with pride. When the message was mercifully over, I’m almost positive he gave me some encouraging words, but while the words elude me, his presence never did. Dad was there.

There is not a single page on the mental scrapbook of my childhood where I felt Dad’s absence. I see him on the banks of Georgia lakes fishing with me. There he is through rearview mirrors smiling. And he’s down the third-base line, just outside the fence, loosened tie and rolled-up sleeves glistening in the southern humidity cheering me on. Dad was there. One can never gift relationship without presence. Dad was present.

The story is told of the time when Henry Brooks went fishing with his father, Charles. (Charles was the grandson of John Adams, our nation’s second president.) They spent all day together, and later on that evening they separately chronicled

the day's events in their journals. The father vented to his journal how he had spent a day fishing and caught nothing. His son Henry had a different take: "Went fishing with my father today, the most glorious day of my life."<sup>1</sup> What marked Henry the most wasn't the catch of the fish but the time with his dad.

Presence matters. I'm not sure what you believe about God, but in reaching for human words to describe Him, biblical academics point out His omnipresence. I know it's a bit of a clunky word, but it means God is everywhere present. One ancient king understood this. His name was David. Surveying his life, one could wonder how ideal David's home life was. His father didn't even invite him to join his brothers when the town prophet came looking for the next king. We know hardly anything about his mother, and what little we do know raises more questions than answers. In a deeply autobiographical moment, David exhaled how he was "brought forth in iniquity, and in sin did my mother conceive me" (Ps. 51:5). David's home life was far from perfect, maybe like the home you were brought up in; yet through it all David never loses hope. His confidence is unshaken as he talks about a good Father who will fill in the gaps and be a tailwind even as his mother and father forsake him (Ps. 27:10). And in Psalm 139, David speaks of this everywhere-present Father who is active in all phases of our lives—from the womb to the grave.

All of us long for this. I'm not sure where you are when it comes to matters of faith, but I do know this—you long for a dad who is present. I've been on death row (just visiting, by the way), and have had men on the precipice of execution ask whether they could pray with me to David's everywhere-present God. I've

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heard stories of women who would never describe themselves as remotely religious, and yet when trouble came their way, they reached for God. And I've read of soldiers huddled in bunkers, clutching a crucifix while being shot at. One author had it right when he wrote, "There are no atheists in foxholes."

So why do we pray in the face of tragedy, make the sign of a cross before the athletic contest, or welcome the priest to stand by our loved one's bedside? We want to believe there is a God, and that this God is present and active in our lives. You may even find this hard to read because you are nursing some deep disappointment with God so great you've given up on the notion of Him altogether. It's probably tethered to some moment in your life when you really needed Him. Perhaps you asked Him to heal a loved one, grant you the job, or rescue you from danger. You prayed hard, went to church, even joined a church. Yet nothing. So you threw up your hands and left. Why? Could it be your protestations to at least the idea of God are because you desired Him to be a father, and the essential thing you expect of a father is to be present?

And why does humanity inwardly boo the father who punts on his responsibility to his children and simply walks away? Because we know at the core of our being, to be a good father means we are present. We show up. You don't have to sit in a house of worship to know this.

I don't want to make too big a deal of the order of these four gifts we dads must give to our children, but it isn't lost on me that relationships are first, and not just because it would ruin the acronym if it wasn't. We cannot lead without showing up, being

present, and walking in relationship. As I've sat with people suffering from fatherhood wounds over the years, the fountainhead to their frustration was rarely tied to dad's incompetence or lack of money, but to his absence. Showing up is most of the battle.

Maybe we begin by rearranging our schedules to attend what really matters to our kids. And when the event is over, we offer a smile instead of words of correction. Years later, they won't remember the wrong note they played at their recital, or the misstep during their ballet performance. Instead, they will remember whether we showed up.

Growing up in Atlanta with parents from the Northeast brought along its comedic moments, like the annual shutting down of the city due to the half-inch of snow. My parents howled as people made a mad dash for the local Winn-Dixie to stock up on milk, bread, and eggs. I used to wonder—why these items? As a kid, I'd have been far more appreciative if Mom came home with Lucky Charms and Rice Krispy Treats.

One year, however, one storm wasn't so funny, at least to me. I was about eight, and Mama had long exchanged the Afro for a perm, and we had replaced our Matador for an army green Volkswagen. My parents' choice of cars was embarrassing. The Matador was orange, and now an army green car? Okay then. While their choice of car color may have been funny, this storm was not. I'm not sure how many inches we got, but I do know it was something Atlanta hadn't seen in a while—though I'm sure if you're from Chicago or thereabouts, it's still laughable. To make matters worse, Dad was gone, and we couldn't get out of the house; the roads were that bad. You'll have to forgive me if I sound a bit

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dramatic, but remember this is how my eight-year-old mind saw things. I really did feel as if we weren't going to make it. And my fears only escalated because my hero was in Chicago on business.

The telephone rang, and I could tell by the way Mama was talking that it was Dad. I got excited and looked to her for some kind of cue that he was coming home, like that day—because, if he didn't, we'd starve. I was sure of it. When she finished, she extended the phone as long as the cord would allow. All I could eke out was, "Dad, we need you to come home." Again, I have no idea what else he said. The only receipt I have with me of that conversation is really the only thing that mattered: "I'll be home today." We hung up. Fear was replaced with confidence. No dying that day. Daddy was coming home. And not much later, he was.





## *Chapter 2*

# BIG FRED

**I**t's a typical Sunday evening around the Matador era, and there I am, situated on the front row of some southern church. I see my feet lurking just over the front pew, and to my left is a little bag stuffed with crayons and coloring books. Mama was petrified that I'd embarrass Dad while he was preaching since it would be just he and I at church that Sunday. So she equipped me with a sack full of distractions, but I don't need them this day. I never did. When my hero stands to preach, I tilt my head back almost as far as it can go to look up. I hold this position for the next forty-five minutes or so until he is done. In some sense, I continue to hold this position when it comes to Crawford Loritts.

Some months later—and I have no memory of this, just what my mother loves to tell people—when asked what I want for Christmas, I request a microphone. That's right, when every

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other kid wanted a Tonka truck or Slinky, I asked for a microphone. A psychologist would have a field day with this bit of information, unearthing some nugget of narcissism I'm sure. But it's what I wanted, and thankfully my parents got it. Later that Christmas morning, I took my new gift, grabbed my Dr. Seuss book like I remember my father collecting his Bible, and I laid it flat on our old antique milk can the same way Dad placed his Bible on the podium. Mother says I would bang my chubby little fist on the milk can the same way Dad did on the podium. And my first attempt at preaching was a three-word sermon plagiarized from my father: "It's God! It's God! It's God!" Already, Dad's presence had marked me.

My father is a remarkable man, but not everything about him is worth mimicking. Some of the cracks in Dad's life are more quirks—you know, the kind where you just roll your eyes and say, "That's just Dad being Dad." My father is an intensely impatient man. He inherited this from his father. Pop-Pop, as we called my grandfather, expected his dinner at four thirty every afternoon. Not four thirty-five. Not four thirty-one. Four. Thirty. On those rare moments when my nana missed the deadline, Pop-Pop would press his head into his right hand and gently tap the fingers of his left hand on the table. With each tap, Nana would rush to pull things together. No, my father didn't do that to my mama. Remember, my mother is from Philly, like the hood in Philadelphia, and she didn't play that game. He was lucky if she even cooked. But Dad was really impatient. A round of golf with him felt more like someone had flipped an hourglass during a game of Taboo than simply hanging. And if he said we were leaving to go

somewhere at a certain time, you'd better be ready five minutes before or you might get left.

But there were other cracks in my father, cracks that I'm still recovering from today. Dad was present, but he was actually gone too much. He's an incredibly driven man who is committed to preaching the gospel. Because he is so gifted and skilled at what he does, invitations for him to preach took him away from me for long stretches of my childhood. Many years, he was gone at least a third to half of the year. It may seem odd I bring this up within the context of him being present, but parents establish what's normal within the confines of their home, which means I assumed everyone's experience with their father was similar to mine. It wasn't until later on in high school when I realized how abstract my childhood was, which led to periods of anger toward my father, but I'm getting ahead of myself.

Yes, Dad is far from deity, and I need you to feel this. If you don't, you'll find it hard to connect to the mosaic of fatherhood I'm trying to piece together from his life. I did not grow up in a sterile environment led by two saints. I was parented by humans, children of Adam, filled with flaws. In hindsight, Dad's ministry trips had a personality-altering effect on my life that still lingers today.

While Dad has more of a nurturing disposition, my mother does not. Mama grew up in a single-parent home, estranged for all but a few months of her life from her father. Being the oldest, she had to take care of her brothers and navigate the minefield of a dysfunctional and volatile home. Her mother never hugged her or told her she loved her. Early on, Mama learned she had to be tough.

Are you doing the math? A nurturing father gone for long

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stretches of time plus a mother (whom I knew loved me intensely) who was not equipped to show affection equals an oldest son who to this day has a hard time emotionally connecting with people. Ask my wife.

When people cry in my office, I feel like I'm being asked to dunk a basketball or play a piece by John Coltrane on the saxophone. I'm lost. I struggle to show empathy—not because I don't want to, but because I don't know how. Thirty years removed from home, and I feel like I'm just really getting to know my father. Oh, and throw into the mix my decision to follow in the same career path of my highly successful and well-known father and, of course, I will get perpetual comparisons to him, with each one sending the message “not good enough.”

When it comes to the coin of humanity, lurking beneath the liability face resides amazing assets. Having a dad who was being pulled in many directions outside of our Atlanta home forged traits like resilience and strength while attacking entitlement all at once. At the start of my athletic seasons, Dad would pull out his calendar and mark which games he would be able to attend. A good season meant he could make about half. When I asked for him to come to more, he would often say, “Son, I know, but I work.” He would then point out that my athletic fees, cleats, and uniforms were paid because of his commitment to work. What's more is he would connect his job to his calling. Years later, I would discover he was talking more in the line of vocation from the Latin *vocatio*, which means “calling.” As a child, I got the message: I was not the center of his world, God was. Along the way, his refusal to be at everything gave me two great gifts: seeing a

man work hard to provide for his family, and refusing to make me the center of his world. There was a strength and resilience to my father that he was obsessed with passing on to me. Dad was not going to raise any boomerang children.

This is a good place for me to stop and encourage you that while God is omnipresent, we're not. And I'm not talking literally. There's a big difference between relationally prioritizing our children and making them the center of our world. We want the former, not the latter. So maybe what this means is once a quarter, sitting down with your daughter or son and going over their recital or sports schedules, marking which events you can make. And the ones you can't make, you should tell them why. There's an important work trip, or you're taking their mother out of town. This way your absences are carefully explained and your children feel relationally cared for.

My father once left on a trip to San Francisco, and just as he was about to leave, I asked him to bring me back one of those San Francisco Giants fitted baseball caps. This kind of hat was the in-thing when I was in high school, and sporting one from the Giants would make me the talk of our school. He made no promises, and since Dad seldom brought things home for us from one of his trips, I didn't expect to get the hat. So when he returned a few days later with it, I was surprised. Of course, I wore it the next day, for all of about two periods, when one of the biggest guys in school promptly took it off of my head. Later on that evening, Dad noticed I didn't have my cap and asked me where it was. A bit embarrassed, I told him what happened. What he said next frightened me. Turning to my mother, he said,

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“Karen, I went out of my way to get Bryan this hat. Don’t let him back in the house until he returns with it.” Then, looking at me with a firm look, showing no teeth, he said, “I don’t care what you have to do to get it back.” Talk about a hard choice. Confront Big Fred or be homeless. Mustering up all the courage I could, and coupled with some prayer, I walked into school the next day and politely asked Big Fred for my hat. When I came home, Dad was reading the paper on the sofa. He looked at my head, saw the hat, and continued reading.

Dad’s lesson was pretty clear. He refused to solve all of my problems. Sometimes, he would just back us into a corner and say, “Figure it out.” These moments were huge for me. Years later, when I would venture out to start a church, raise money, and lead a family, I would hit these “Big Fred” challenges and would have to reach down into a reservoir of resilience and strength, first forged by a father who refused to coddle me. He was present, but he didn’t hover.

Your kids are likely a lot more resilient than you give them credit for. Demanding they get a job, telling them to stand up to bullies, or refusing to buy them the latest fashions are much more beneficial for their long-term development as arrows than coddling or hovering over them in your quest to make them happy.

Oh, and if you’re wondering how I got the cap back from Big Fred. No, he didn’t give it to me when I asked. And I didn’t hit him or pay him to give me the cap. I told on him.