

Preface

The doctor was right.

“Perfect,” he said.

“Are you sure everything is okay?” I asked anyway.

He said it again. “Perfect.”

At that moment I knew Dr. Singleton must be a pretty smart and insightful obstetrician. My first grandchild was, in fact, perfect.

Chandler James Huckabee, a healthy seven-pound two-ounce baby boy was born to my middle son, David, and his wife, Lauren, on July 2, 2011. As I looked at this little guy for the first time, I could think of no better word to describe him. For one, he was, in fact, perfect, with ten little fingers, ten little toes, and a rounded head quite unlike the coneheads of so many newborns. His skin was velvety smooth, and in my arms he slept

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soundly, no doubt exhausted from the journey he'd just had. A little blanket kept him warm, and a red, white, and blue stocking cap covered his thick wisp of dark brown hair. Yes, he was perfect.

The other reason I couldn't think of a different word to describe him was because that perfect little baby had turned me into a blathering idiot. I was so dumbstruck by becoming a grandfather, my brain had shut down.

Over the years, I have watched several of my friends become grandparents, and as I listened to them yammer on about how adorable their grandkids were or waited patiently as they showed me what seemed like hundreds of photos, I had vowed to myself that I would never be such an obnoxious grandpa. I had actually started avoiding these people out of fear I'd be subjected to an extended conversation about a first "poo-poo" in the potty chair or, worse, a ten-minute cell phone video of the infamous poo-poo itself. I would be proud of my grandkids, sure, but I knew I would still handle myself with some dignity.

But then I held Chandler for the first time. As I looked at him, I realized that this little guy would carry on the Huckabee genes and the Huckabee name (assuming he didn't one day become a rock star and change his name

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to “Daddy Goo-Goo”). My stiff upper lip started to quiver and the tears in my eyes weren’t from my contact lenses.

It had been almost thirty-five years since I had held my oldest child, Chandler’s uncle, John Mark, for the first time. Awe and wonder at the miracle of life had overwhelmed me then, just as it would a few years later, when my second son, Chandler’s dad, David James, and then my only daughter and last child, Sarah Elizabeth, were born. And as I looked at my first grandchild, it overwhelmed me again.

Perfect. He really seemed to be just that. Oh, I understand that even *my* grandson isn’t actually perfect in a Jesus kind of way, but at that moment I thought the attending physician showed almost divine insight by deeming the boy flawless. He seemed comfortable around a lot of new people, and despite being only a few minutes old, he was already chatting away with his brand-new family, all of whom were oohing and aahing back. Okay, he didn’t actually talk, but I’m pretty sure he knew how much he was loved.

Up until then, I really had planned on keeping my excitement over my first grandchild locked in the vault of my own heart. But my volition was overwhelmed by my emotions and I, too, became one of those obnoxious grandparents.

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Luckily, this has worked to my advantage, because I could always avoid unwanted conversations. For example, whenever I found myself sitting next to an excessively chatty passenger on an airplane, I could bring out my phone and say, “Hey, I have about three thousand photos of my grandson I’d like to show you,” and he would usually stop talking to me immediately. My obsession also helped me come up with material for my weekly television show because I could insert photos of my ever growing grandson into the opening monologue if I ever ran out of things to say. I’m sure the people who watch my show loved seeing just how adorable he was.

Not long after Chandler was born, my baby girl Sarah (she’s thirty and married, but she’s still my baby girl) announced that she was pregnant. A few weeks later, we found out it would be a girl. So with Chandler just a few weeks old, we learned that in less than a year he would have a cousin, my daughter would have her firstborn child, and Janet and I would have our second grandchild and first granddaughter. Months before she was born, she already had a name: Scarlett Wiles Sanders. (Wiles was my father’s middle name, so she would get something from her paternal side.) I was pretty certain the doctor would very soon be calling her perfect,

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too (he'd better, if he wanted to get paid!), and I'd be broadcasting her photo to my TV viewers each week.

Becoming a grandparent has been life changing, but beyond the sheer joy of it all, there is some very real responsibility that has weighed heavily on me. Like every grandparent, I hope to give even better counsel than I did with my own kids. After all, when I was raising them, I was a total neophyte at being a parent and had to learn everything as I went along. Now, many years, and many gray hairs, later, I have the perspective that comes with having taken the whole job of parenting from concept to completion, so to speak. I'm sure their parents are terrified I'll mess their kids up the way they think I messed them up, but, hey, they turned out okay!

And besides, Chandler's and Scarlett's parents are going to be very busy just keeping the kids fed and clothed and getting them to soccer practice and Scouts (sweet revenge for when I had to do all those things thirty years ago). Someone has to take charge of the big stuff. Of course, like any proud grandpa, I intend to spoil my grandkids rotten whenever they come to visit, but I also want to offer them something of greater value than my collection of vintage guitars, firearms (if Scarlett is anything like her mother, she won't find these

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very useful anyway), and photos of me hanging out with far more famous and important people from my days in politics or media. I want to give them something that won't collect dust and can't be auctioned on eBay. They are my blood-kin descendants, but I want them to inherit more from me than whatever I put in my will. I want to give them my wisdom and teach them the lessons I've learned in my fifty-seven years on this earth. Do I expect them to heed all of my advice and cling to every word? Not really. They probably won't understand most of it until they are about sixteen, and at that point, well, if they're like all other teenagers, I can't imagine they'll be looking for advice from their elders and trying to identify *more* with their relatives. But maybe one day Chandler and Scarlett will remember and understand the things I tell them.

Although my advice comes from my personal experience and I'm writing with my grandkids in mind, I hope any parent, grandparent, child, or grandchild can take away something valuable from these letters. I'll try not to be too obnoxious, but, don't worry, if you ever sit next to me on a plane, I'll still be happy to show you all the photos I have on my phone.