

A Man Wh Knows How

(!!!) t  H  Id a Baby !

Hey, be careful!

By

Hal Corley

WHY I LIKE IT: *Drama Editor JOHN SULLIVAN writes...The mythic power of paternal DNA is encoded in the title of A Man Who Knows How to Hold a Baby. That phrase echoes in Baxter's head as a nagging reproach, a judgment on his fitness to raise Andy as well as any biological father, and triggers a cascade of insecurity and recriminations in the moments before the pair has their first meeting with Andy's actual bio-Dad. The tension between father and son is palpable on the page as each one copes with their anxieties in their own unique, sometimes mutually irritating ways. This dialogue sounds perfectly natural, running a full scale of tones and nuance. Sometimes sharp and abrasive, sometimes full of self-deprecation and irony, sometimes funny, but also anxious and vaguely disturbing - like nervous laughter. This miniature portrait is contained and enclosed, feeding the audience just enough information about where the characters have already gone together while never leaving their current physical and emotional context. (Spacing is playwright's own.)*

Five stars

A Man Who Knows How to Hold a Baby

A Ten-Minute Play
By Hal Corley

CAST OF CHARACTERS

BAXTER
ANDY

THE SCENE

Waiting area near an airport gate.

THE TIME

August. Now.

A “/” in dialog indicates overlap.

(A waiting area near an airport gate, Newark New Jersey. An August night. A storm rages outside as thunder and seemingly near hurricane-force winds sound ominously in the dark. Lights up on BAXTER, 50-something, and ANDY, 19, sitting alone in a long row of seats. ANDY is watching a movie on his phone, notably without sound. Visibly agitated, BAXTER holds a nail clipper, and eyes one finger critically.)

BAXTER

"Now *there's* a man who knows how to hold a *baby!*" she said. To the room.

ANDY

Hey. Don't do that here.

BAXTER

The whole *room*. Immediately, my *antennae* rose—as they always *do* 'round your grandmother, especially in those days—and I think to myself, "Now what was *that* about? 'A man who knows how to hold a baby.'"

ANDY

Uncle Joey y'mean? Uncle Joey was "the man?"

BAXTER

Sure, *he'd* produced three kids “the old-fashioned way,” he and his nasty do-gooder wife,

ANDY

Nasty, hasn't she done, like, missionary work in Costa Rica?

BAXTER

I'm sorry but she can be just plain *unkind* at home. And okay—so Joey knew how to change a diaper—whoop-de-do, I always loved the irony: folks who wouldn't use paper towels eschewing the *cloth* variety. Must be a landfill somewhere full of their personal cache of disposables.

ANDY

What is your point?

BAXTER

I'm getting to it—and so talented-with-a-Huggie Joey *also* knew how to position a baby's *head* so it wouldn't wobble. So did *I*. That stuff's textbook self-help. Not something in the paternal *DNA*.

ANDY

Whatever. Don't do that *here*, Dad, come on.

BAXTER

I'm not clipping random nails, as you might say; I have a hangnail.

ANDY

So don't deal with it in an airport!

BAXTER

I don't chew mine in public like some people. Whose musical skills should inspire them to protect their precious / fingertips—

ANDY

You always, like, trim away, so anybody can see, even when you don't have hangnails. Who else carries a nail clipper in his pocket?

BAXTER

I purposely brought an old rusty one—

ANDY

Real healthy, rust.

BAXTER

—to clear security, one that didn't have the supposedly threatening but useless knife attachment. Got it through, didn't I?

ANDY

What a relief.

BAXTER

So anyway—from *that* moment on, your granny always made this distinction between *my* skills and those of / biological—

ANDY

That was, like, twenty years ago.

BAXTER

It was a *curse* she put out at that family reunion, a curse on me.

ANDY

That is so, like, over the top.

BAXTER

So was she, believe me. Feeling justified, questioning my daddy talents.

ANDY

She was totally fine about your "daddy talents" later.

BAXTER

Sure, after they were on spectacular display and couldn't be denied. She initially failed to acknowledge even their potential.

ANDY

Lighten *up*. Only grandmother I ever had.

BAXTER

Well, I love *that*. That you got a hands-on grandma. The—the cookie-baking, over-the-river-n'-through the woods stuff? Sure, terrific, all that. But boy! When a vote of confidence counted, was she ever ready with the thinly veiled insults!

ANDY

Since when do you call her "granny" and "grandma?" I can always tell when you're nervous about stuff, you start using all these, like, cutesy names for things.

BAXTER

What else did I say that was "cutesy" tonight?

ANDY

"Daddy talents"? Or telling me to eat up at home ' cause we'll be forced to go to "Mickey D's" the next coupla days. You never say "*Micky D's*." Cut that shit out.

BAXTER

I always come back to that reunion when you were five weeks old because *I must*—

(ANDY lets out an exasperated sigh)

In addition to drawing this line down the center of their over-decorated living room, with the fruitful parents on one side and your poor barren mom and pop on the other—

ANDY

T.M.I.

BAXTER

—everybody handled you with this sense of entitlement. Like they had right to paw you.

ANDY

Whatever, like I said, twenty / *years*—

BAXTER

We'd just been told by the pediatrician *not* to let every stranger who wanted to coochie-coochie-coo you have at it—

ANDY

Uncle Joey and Aunt Mary Lou weren't strangers.

BAXTER

But they let your cousins put their sticky mitts all over you. They were always eating some cheap garbage candy—Joey bragged about your cousins' loving broccoli but ignored their high fructose corn syrup addiction.

ANDY

They did eat a lotta crap growin' up.

BAXTER

And were encouraged to toss ya around like their doll. Like you were common property. "Gimme Baby Andrew! No, it's my turn with Baby Andy! *I* called dibs on Baby Andy in the car!" Terrible way to start things off. Oh, those / people—

ANDY

Okay now, Dad, we're *done*.

BAXTER

Remember when you first started playing? How obsessed they were with "where" you got the talent? You'd think "from God" would shut 'em up, but no. "*Your mother and father*"—they always italicized the words when they said 'em about mom and me—"They can't play the harmonica, and here *you* are a darned Paderewski." Like they know from Paderewski. Or harmonicas.

ANDY

Don't get so worked up.

BAXTER

They truly believe we're just stand-in parents. Like *they'd* know how to raise a prodigy. And I tell ya, it all started at that fateful / reunion—

ANDY

Dad, chill. You're all / weirded out.

BAXTER

—when they suggested I didn't know bupkis about / burping you—

ANDY

Dad. Calm down. Just go over there and clip your nails, okay?

BAXTER

Why can't you just be patient with me?

(ANDY puts a hand up; silence.)

I'm sorry. This trip, it just brings all that up.

ANDY

You wanted me to take this trip.

BAXTER

But that doesn't mean it's easy.

(*because:*)

I have spent the last nineteen years defending my turf.

ANDY

Why.

BAXTER

'Cause you're my son and there are *people*, like your grandmother used to be, and like your narrow-minded aunt and uncle still are, who want to remind me that I'm a parent *only* by going an alternate route.

ANDY

You want everybody else to get over it, why don't you?

BAXTER

You're young, predisposed to make complex issues sound simple. You don't get it, your mom and me have been made to feel—

ANDY

Like second class parents! I *know!* But if you aren't—if *you* don't really think you are yourself—stop bringing it up!

(Thunder sounds in the distance.)

BAXTER

This feels like the end of the road somehow.

ANDY

Well, it's not.

BAXTER

I mean, I'm really not threatened by your meeting him. I want you to know him and feel whatever about him you end up feeling. Or so I tell myself. Ask me again on the way home. But uncomfortable or *whatever*, it just feels the end of something for *me*.

ANDY

So then why don't you not go?

(BAXTER just stares)

Maybe the storm's a good thing. You don't have to get on the plane.

BAXTER

Ridiculous! My luggage is on! Ours. We shared the / suitcase—

ANDY

You don't *have* to go.

BAXTER

But you asked me to come. That meant everything. Now you don't want me to go?

ANDY

Probably wasn't fair.

BAXTER

But what if this guy's a handful?

ANDY

I'll *handle* it. Two days at "Micky D's" and I'm outta there.

BAXTER

I've wanted to run since we got here. 'Storm hit, I thought phew, ground the planes, we'll jump in a cab and be home in time to eat dinner with your mom. Who's a wreck, I'm sure. You know she's sitting there, a blubbery mess.

ANDY

Mom's sipping chamomile tea, totally, like, glad she's got the house to herself.

BAXTER

Look, in the month since you planned this, do you know how many people have said, “So your boy’s finally meeting his real father?”

ANDY

I have *never* referred to him as my real father.

BAXTER

And of course, this has the potential to be the golden moment of a lifetime. The two of you sitting down to play twin pianos together, tone-deaf me twiddling my well-trimmed thumbs, applauding in the / background—

ANDY

Daddy! It's not the moment of a lifetime!

(silence)

Did you bring the old refilled iPod?

BAXTER

I hate that thing. Or those earphones. Like gnats.

ANDY

Here, use this: old-fashioned kind.

BAXTER

I don't want to listen to anything now—

ANDY

I put stuff on you like.

BAXTER

I'm not in the mood to be reminded of the glorious eighties—

ANDY

I put *me* on there. Me.

(BAXTER stares at it)

Playing.

BAXTER

Really?

ANDY

Me, doing the Debussy Arabesque No. 1.

BAXTER

You did not.

ANDY

So will you listen and shut up a while?

BAXTER

(beat)

Did you really think I wouldn't get on the plane with you?

ANDY

Just listen to Debussy, and let me watch my movie, okay?

(BAXTER puts on the headset, ANDY hits the button on the iPod. BAXTER winces, shaking his head:)

BAXTER

Okay, gotta say it: maybe *not* your very *best* recording.

(ANDY throws his hands up)

I'm sorry, but you put the microphone *way* too close. I've told you, how many times.

(ANDY adjusts in his seat, silently fuming.)

I'm sorry, it just gives it that rinky-dink tinkly player piano sound that doesn't do justice to your work. Also, there's an echo—

(ANDY turns away)

Well, there is. I'm telling you, 'cause I *have* to. With your gift, you always deserve the unvarnished truth. And *I* have a right to give it, to be critical of details. I've earned it—

(stops, takes off the headset)

"Now there's a man who knows how to hold a baby."

(puts a hand on ANDY's knee)

Andy? It's beautiful.

(He returns to the headset, listening intently. Exasperated, ANDY shakes his head, goes back to his movie. BAXTER steals a glance—and then lingers; he stares at his son, with fresh wonder. As Debussy wafts in, it's overcome by thunder, lights fade.)

THE PLAYWRIGHT SPEAKS: *As a former soap writer, I worked on countless plots that in design or execution romanticized the adopted child's quest for a biological origin story, a narrative with an 18th century bloodline-above-all-else mythos. In particular, the child/birthparent reunion was frequently dramatized as a fix for a troubled life. The other third of the adoption triangle is no less idealized. The prevailing cultural characterization: that adoptive parents are rescuers, even saviors. As well-meaning as*

that construct may be, it's inaccurate, morally, spiritually and even practically. Adoptive parents do not save children; their children broaden and deepen them. Arguably, and I'm far from the first to express this, they save parents, opening hearts and minds in mysterious ways. A Man Who Knows How to Hold a Baby is a gentle, small canvas correction that aims to honor the search for biological roots and respect the adoptive parent's resulting anxieties.

*History and revisions: the play had its world premiere at the New American Theatre, Los Angeles, California, as a part of the 15th Festival of One Act Plays, the summer of 2010. As one of the Best of the Fest, the production reopened in October for an additional six-week run. It was directed by Artistic Director, Jack Stehlin. The play was produced again **last winter (2022)**, in this shorter, revised iteration, for the Adoption Awareness Project, San Diego.*

AUTHOR BIO: Hal has developed his plays with major companies (Seattle Rep, Syracuse Stage, Walnut Street, Premiere Stages, Alliance, San Francisco's NCTC, Adirondack Theater Festival); three full-length scripts, *Mama and Jack Carew*, *Easter Monday*, and *ODD*, are published by Samuel French/Concord. His *Treed* is published by Playscripts in *Great Short Plays Volume 10*; his *Dolor* is in Applause's *Best American Short Plays 2014-2015*; and his *Fanny Otcott* is with Youth Plays. Scenes and monologues from his plays are collected in six S&K and Samuel French anthologies, including a new volume published in late 2022; thirty of his one-acts have been produced in 18 states and Canada. For his work in daytime serial, Hal won five Emmys, two WGA, and two GLAAD Awards. He lives in New Jersey.