

Free Dad Hugs

A One Act Play (approximately 20 minutes)

By Gary Davis

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11/18/22 version

16 pages

SETTING

Akron PrideFest at Hardesty Park. Stage has a park bench with 'Hardesty Park' on it and a trash can next to it. A rainbow flag should be draped casually over the park bench. Some trash is strewn about the stage.

CHARACTERS

JACOB	an older man (50s to 70s) wearing a t-shirt that says FREE DAD HUGS, straight, but accepting of all
DAVID	a young gay man in his teens, deeply wounded
LATITIA	a black lesbian in her early 30s, happy and proud of where she is in life

SCENE OPENS

(Pride Fest has ended and most of the participants have gone home. Jacob is picking up trash near a park bench. Picks up a Chinese carryout container.)

JACOB

Oh my, it's full.

(sniffs it)

General Tso's

(looking at the box)

from Imperial Wok! Oh, you smell so good, but I don't know where you've been!

(Laughs and shakes his head because he sure isn't going to eat that. Drops it in the trash)

Oh well. I guess I know where I'm going for dinner.

(proceeds to clean up more trash including a paper bag; also finds a dollar bill which he pockets)

Ah! Lucky me!

DAVID

(enters right, sees the t-shirt)

Free Dad Hugs? What the hell!

(bitterly)

Is that for real? People actually fall for that?

JACOB

(calmly)

There's nothing to fall for. It's exactly what it says it is. For some people a hug has meaning. A hug ... helps.

DAVID

And you're here to help them? Or to help yourself! Help yourself to a handful of some kid's ass ... or some lesbian's tits up against your chest! Not that any of the perverts here would give a damn. They're happy to hand it out.

JACOB

(calmly, but sincerely)

They're not perverts. They're good people.

(then inspired by a thought)

YOU'RE a good person.

(David looks at him in shock, then turns and walks quickly off stage)

Wait!

(sighs and turns back to his work)

LATITIA

(enters from the audience and up the stairs to the stage; waves to someone in the direction of the audience as if to say 'I'll just be a minute,' then turns to Jacob, nervously)

Hello, Jacob.

JACOB

(looking up)

Oh, hello.

LATITIA

You probably don't remember me. I think it was 10 years ago, give or take, that I ran into you and your silly t-shirt at Akron Pride Fest. You gave me such a big warm hug.

(starts to tear up)

And as that old song goes I'm going to put that hug back where I found it!

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(she gives him a long and emotional hug and kisses him on the cheek)

JACOB

Oh, my. I think that was an old Benny Goodman tune, before my time actually. It has been a while. I know your face, I do, but, I'm sorry, I'm not so good with names lately. Please forgive me.

LATITIA

Nothing to forgive, papa. You don't mind if I call you papa, do you?

JACOB

Not at all, baby girl.

(they sit on the bench, he holds her hands while she talks)

LATITIA

I was hoping I'd find you here. When I first met you, I was at the lowest point of my life. My parents kicked me out of the house when I was 16. I dropped out of school and was living in shelters ... on the streets ... doing whatever I could to get by. One night I was attacked by a group of men who decided they knew what I needed to turn me straight. I wouldn't go along so they

(long pause)

forced me, beat me. So bad, I ended up in the hospital. The doctors told me I would never have children. I am a lesbian, but I had hoped someday for a baby ... a child I would love. And maybe I would get some love back.

JACOB

(with his hand on her face)

Latitia, your name is Latitia. I remember your story. It broke my heart.

LATITIA

(with tears)

You **do** remember me. You don't know how much that means to me.

(they hug)

JACOB

You look so ... grown up ... and in a much better place.

LATITIA

Yes, yes I am. It started with your hug.

(pulls a newspaper clipping out of her shirt pocket)

Do you remember this?

JACOB

(he takes the clipping which is a big picture)

Yes, yes I do. That reporter was roaming Pride Fest taking pictures and talking to people.

LATITIA

She took these pictures and put them in the Sunday Beacon. My Mom and Dad saw it and read the story. A few days later they found me in a shelter. They said they were so ashamed of how they treated me. They begged me to forgive them and come home. We hugged long and hard. I went home, went back to school and got my GED and went on to college. One day I moved out, but I wasn't thrown out, I wasn't running away. I was growing up. I got a job. I'm a case worker at Children's Services. A few years ago, I found my wife.

(in tears)

When Dad walked me down the aisle, it was a day of happiness I never thought would happen!

(pointing)

Look over on the playground over there. See that woman? That's Sarah. She's my wife.

(waves to Sarah)

JACOB

I have to ask, who's that little boy with her on the swings?

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LATITIA

He's our son. We adopted him when he was an infant. The moment I laid eyes on him at Children's Services,

(pauses, chokes up with tears of happiness)

I fell in love all over again. You should see dad with him. Dad still hurts inside for how he treated me. I told him to make it up to me by being the best Grandpa in the world! You should see the two of them together!

(laughs)

They're like two little kids in a sandbox!

JACOB

He looks so happy. I know you're proud.

LATITIA

We named him Jake.

(Jacob covers his mouth as he gasps, tears in his eyes. He looks back at her and she nods as if to say, yes, I named him after you)

I hope you don't mind.

JACOB

Of course I don't mind.

(they hug)

So many hugs I've given, I don't always get to hear their stories. Sometimes I do. You don't know how happy it makes me to hear yours.

LATITIA

Your hug meant so much to me ... and I know I can't be the only one. Sarah and I ... we're taking Jake to Mary Coyle's for some ice cream. It would mean the world to me if you would join us. My treat!

JACOB

Of course! How could I refuse an ice cream with my little namesake? Why don't you three go on ahead. I'm almost finished here and my car is just a block away. I'll just be a few minutes.

(They stand up. She walks offstage the way she entered to her wife and child. Jacob stops and waves. As this happens, David enters again and sits on the bench. Jacob turns and sees him ... steps towards him then sees David has a revolver in his hands which he stares at. Jacob looks back to make sure Latitia is safely away, then turns back to David, slowly steps towards him and sits next to him on the bench. David looks at him, surprised that he sat down.)

JACOB

(cautiously)

Are you OK son?

DAVID

I'm not your son! Why are you sitting there?

(waving gun in the air)

Aren't you scared?

JACOB

(calmly, but earnestly)

I'm scared shitless. But I hope you don't mind.

DAVID

You should go; join your friends.

JACOB

I very much want to do that. But right now I can't. You overheard all that, did you?

DAVID

Not all of it ... but enough. I guess you're for real; I'm sorry I said you were a fraud. Why do you do this anyway?

JACOB

I wish I could say it was my own idea, it's not. My friend Denise, if you saw a woman wearing a shirt saying 'Free Mom Hugs,' that was her. Some years back Denise asked me if I would do this with her. I loved what she was doing. But I thought that moms were probably more accepting of gay children, dads more rigid and unbending. Maybe it would mean something to a few people to get a hug from an accepting father figure.

(looking in the direction Latitia went)

Turned out for some people it meant a lot. Till now I didn't know how much.

(pause)

What's your name?

DAVID

David.

JACOB

David, why do you have that gun?

(David is silent, Jacob waits for a response)

The fact that you can't answer that question frightens me. Can you tell me what brought you to this point?

DAVID

(avoiding the question)

How did you know?

(angrily)

I don't talk like them; I don't mince about like them! How did you know?

JACOB

I can't really say. But at that moment, I didn't think it made a difference. I just felt you needed to hear someone say that you were a good person.

DAVID

Well, I'm not! My parents say I'm not! People at church say I'm not! My conversion therapist says I'm not ... a good ... person!

JACOB

Conversion therapist ... oh no! David, what did they do to you?

(David is silent. He wants to speak, but can't)

I know this is hard. But I promise you this is a safe space.

DAVID

Why should I believe you?

JACOB

I understand.

(hesitates, then with extreme difficulty)

When ... when I was young, younger than you, I had a hard time dealing with people, relating to people, with other kids my age. I just couldn't get along. To say I was socially awkward would have been an understatement. So

(long pause)

so ... I was ... a target. And I couldn't deal with that, and that just made the target bigger and it was a magnet to every bully in school. There were a lot of them. There was

(long pause)

violence ... physical and otherwise – beatings ... threats ... mocking. I'm not gay, but there were lots of taunts in that direction. 'Fairy' was common. For a long while I hated gays because of that, as if they were the reason I was a victim. I thought if I hated them, too, then the bullies might think I was one of them. They never did. I lived in anger and ... constant fear. Fear of the next attack, fear my

parents would find out and be ashamed of me. There was a weight in my chest that never went away. I hated myself.

DAVID

Shit!

JACOB

Then I met Ron. Ron was gay ... is gay. Despite the accusations against me, he knew I wasn't. Despite my bad behavior he offered friendship. He wasn't trying to convert me; he never tried to take advantage of me. He just held out a hand and accepted me for who I was. Unlike me, he was a strong person. He became my role model.

DAVID

Where is he now? Why isn't he here with you?

JACOB

We're still best of friends. But right now he and his husband are on vacation. It's their 10th wedding anniversary. They've been together 25 years but weren't able to make it official until 10 years ago. I was his best man. Look, David, I have to tell you that I had so many scars for so long and I can't honestly tell you they're all gone; some will always be with me. But I'm proud of the person I've become. Eventually there came a time when I realized that ... I was actually happy with my life.

DAVID

So you've been there.

JACOB

I've been there. So please believe me when I say that the person I've become would never use your pain against you. I promise you, you **are** in a safe space.

DAVID

(very long pause and speaks with great difficulty)

My father, when he found out ... he tried to beat it out of me. When that didn't work, he dragged me in front of the minister. I was an **abomination** in God's eyes, but I had a chance for salvation if I went to this camp.

JACOB

The camp ...

DAVID

Father insisted I go. At first it didn't seem so bad. It was 'camp!' But after a while I could tell that the kids who'd been there the longest seemed ... messed up. And the longer I was there, the more messed up I felt. It was like something out of that book we read in school, 1984 ... always screwing with your mind, breaking you down. They'd wake you up in the middle of the night to search your room. They'd punish you in front of everyone to humiliate you. If someone got in trouble and you knew about it and didn't tell, you got in trouble, too. So everyone was a snitch. I was, too. $2 + 2 = 5$.

(Jacob listens intently, but regularly glances at the gun. There is a long pause. David comes to a wall and can't speak.)

JACOB

(finally)

David, what happened is on them. It says everything about them and nothing about you. The fault is on them. You **are** a good person. If you can continue, I'm listening.

DAVID

(after a long pause and with great difficulty)

The worst part is ... they took God away from me. I always thought God loved me no matter what. But they said it over and over ... God! Hates! Fags! He hates **me**! Once they smacked me in the face with a bible ... did it in front of all the other kids.

(long pause)

My family was there watching. The camp counselors made **them** hit me with the bible, too ... even my mom! It was just a tap; I don't think she wanted to do it. But Father yelled at her, so she did it again and again ... harder and harder. Then she just exploded. Father pulled her off and screamed, 'Look what you've done to your mother!' I knew **he** hated me, but I always thought my mom loved me. How

could she do that? Those people are always going on and on about God's love, God's love! But they use God like a weapon, like a fist in the face!

JACOB

Oh, David, that's not God. But those people, people who use God as a weapon, tend to put their own words, their own hateful words into God's mouth.

DAVID

So it's the church that's that way?

JACOB

Some. But not all churches are like that. There's the First Congregational Church on East Market. They're very open and accepting to the Gay community. So is Emmanuel Fellowship and St. Bernard's, and St. Vincent's where I go. And there are others.

DAVID

Oh that would be something. My old man hates Catholics as much as Gays. He's a real old testament guy, a real Abraham. If he thought God wanted me dead, he'd do it himself.

JACOB

Oh no, David, that can't be true! You're his son.

DAVID

No, it's true. Well the joke's on him 'cause this is his gun!

(laughing and waving it around, Jacob is terrified)

So you'll excuse me if a free "dad" hug is the last thing I want.

JACOB

I understand. It sounds like you had no one ... no one on **your** side.

DAVID

(long pause)

No, I ... I did have someone ... for while. He was another kid I met at camp. We couldn't ... do anything ... couldn't even hug ... or hold hands. Everyone was

always watching. We couldn't ever be alone. But we could talk and that meant so much.

(with great difficulty)

A couple days ago ... they took Benny away in an ambulance.

(emotionally collapsing in pain)

They wouldn't tell us anything! I don't know if he's alive or dead!

JACOB

(sudden realization)

You're not here to hurt somebody else, are you? You're here to hurt yourself. **That's** what the gun's for.

DAVID

(angrily through tears)

Two kids dead in two days? Can't sweep **that** under the rug! I'm gonna shut that place down for good!

JACOB

David, listen to me! If Benny was alive when the ambulance took him, chances are the hospital took care of him. And a dead kid is not easy to hush up and I haven't heard anything in the news, not a word. I'm sure he's still alive. I'll help you find him.

DAVID

You will?

JACOB

Yes, I promise.

(sternly)

But I want you to think about this David. If you mean as much to Benny as he does to you, you have to know your death would really hurt him. And at a time that he needs you the most.

DAVID

What? No, no, I couldn't ... oh, Benny, I'm sorry! I'm so sorry!

(collapses to his knees on the ground)

JACOB

Right now he really needs you. So please, David,

(pause)

would you give me the gun?

(David pauses...looks at Jacob and the gun. Slowly hands it to him. Jacob takes the gun and tries to think of what to do with it. He opens the cylinder and removes it from the gun. From the trash can he takes out the Chinese carryout box, opens it, smooshes the cylinder inside, closes it and puts it back in the trash. Puts the rest of the gun in the paper bag he'd put in the trash earlier. Takes a deep breath and lets it out as all the tension is released.)

Thank you, David.

DAVID

Are you gonna call the police on me?

JACOB

No, I'm not. But after all that

(manages a small laugh)

I'm starving! What about you?

DAVID

I guess so. I haven't eaten in a long time.

(both laughing lightly from the release of nervous tension)

JACOB

I don't imagine so. I'm gonna meet some friends at Mary Coyle's for some ice cream ... and maybe pizza. I think you'd like them. I know they'll like you. Will you join us? My treat!

DAVID

(pause)

Yeah ... yeah. I'd like that.

JACOB

Just a moment.

(takes out his cell phone and makes a call)

Father Norman? Yeah, it's Jacob. Are you doing anything right now? I'm meeting some friends at Mary Coyle's and it would mean the world to me if you would join us. My treat! Thanks, Father. I'll see you there.

(puts phone back in pocket, back to David)

Well, why don't we head over.

(he points)

My car's over there.

(David gets up and walks ahead of him ... stops and turns to face Jacob. They both look at each other. David suddenly wraps his arms around Jacob who is caught off guard, his arms are at his sides. Slowly Jacob lifts his arms and returns the hug. David is sobbing. Lights slowly fade to black, but a single tight spotlight remains on the rainbow flag draped on the back of the park bench. David and Jacob need to have moved far enough to the side of the bench for this spotlight to be effective. If there is an outro song, consider "Over the Rainbow" performed by Israel Kamakawiwo'ole)

The End

Note: The scene with David should be incredibly tense. The audience should think that someone could die. Jacob should also think that one of them may die and it could be him. It's hard for him to look away from the gun. The audience should be emotionally invested in Jacob making that meeting with Latitia and her family.

Property Note: something needs to be inside the carryout box so that it's clear Jacob is smooshing the revolver cylinder into the contents, not into an empty box.

Note to Producers/Directors: The play is set in the Akron area. All the place names and church names are real. Normally theaters/performers are not allowed to change anything in a script. However, you are free, even encouraged, to change those names to reflect the reality of the community in which this is performed. Those references that can be changed include

Akron Pride Fest – make it your local Pride Fest

Hardesty Park

Mary Coyle's – a popular local restaurant and ice cream parlor

Imperial Wok – Asian restaurant

Beacon Journal – local newspaper

All the listed churches – be sure to name local churches welcoming to the gay community

East Market – if you change the church names, you can change this street name as well

Father Norman – well respected by the gay community

Children's Services – a common reference, but if your community has a specific name, use that.

Dedicated to Scott Dittman who gave free dad hugs at a Pittsburgh Pride Parade
https://www.dailykos.com/stories/2019/8/25/1866749/-Man-Gives-Out-Free-Dad-Hugs-At-Pride-Parade-Many-Abandoned-By-Family-Broke-Down-In-His-Embrace?utm_campaign=trending