**Huggerlovers**

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Clench your fist, hard. Clench it and hold it until it is red—until your palm is sweaty, your knuckles are white, and your whole hand is shaking. Swallow that fist. Don’t panic. It should be over soon.

I’ve spent a lot of time lately around people you might call huggers; huggers are people who put their arms around you–sometimes your waist, sometimes shoulders; it varies by height. They put their arms around you, and they try to squeeze some emotion out of you. It started about a week ago at a summer camp I’ve been working at.

The horde of potential huggers had been doing one activity or another. It ends, they all stand up.

“So, what are we doing now?” I ask the camp leader beside me.

“Hugs!” she says.

“What?”

“Hugs, you know,” she hugs me, around the arms. I don’t move. “Hugs,” she repeats.

“Oh…”

“Don’t you like hugs?”

I shake my head. She frowns.

“Who doesn’t like hugs?”

I shrug, “Me.”

“Well, that’s a stupid thing to be.”

“Me?”

“Yes.”

She hugs me again. She looks up at my face. “Jesus,” she says, “you’d think I was made of fire.”

“Not fire–just, discomfort. I just have–like, a bubble.” I use my hands to show her where my bubble begins. She pokes at it, rudely.

Then, she looks around at all the campers; like a game of bumper cars, they move around the room, crashing into each other with open arms.

“Are you too manly for hugs?” she asks, suspicious.

I look at my feet. “No, I just don’t feel comfortable with hugging, it’s weird.”

“Who doesn’t like hugs!” she exclaims. Then looks around for allies. She finds them. A group of waist-high huggers.

“Hug him!” she demands, pointing at me. They do, stepping right through my bubble as though it were made of air.

I clench my fists, try to breathe. They begin to laugh; one audacious hugger even lets out an “aww.”

The other huggers take notice, they advance–a mob. My arms are pinned. Time takes a step outside of eternity, I can’t move; trapped. I wait with red fists.

Then finally, I am set free. My legs are the only things that held onto their wits; they take me quickly to the door. I step out into the sunlight; it is cold. Taking a breath, I look back in through the window. The game of bumper cars is still going on.

I watch the game slowly dissipate until it becomes nothing but salty cheeks and tired arms.

I step back inside. My heart is still cowering in my stomach, sitting on a fist. I stand awkwardly on the outskirts. Everyone is mulling about, chatting.

Then, across the room, one of the smallest huggers spots me. He makes his way over, a sinister look in his eyes.

When he is close enough, he opens his arms.

“How are you?” he says.

“I–” I try, but he’s already put his arms around me. He doesn’t let go.

 Without realizing it, I find myself patting him on the back.