

## Hugs

*By Paula Cunningham*

Resounding approval is received upon a job well done, resulting in downcast brown eyes, with a slight pink blush to his smooth freckled cheeks, followed by a softly spoken “Thank you” from his smiling lips. He is pleased that he has accomplished the task at hand and feels proud of his achievement. I, feeling on top of the world because he has learned so well what I have taught, lean in to wrap my arms around him. A hug is defined by the *Oxford Dictionary* as “an act of holding someone tightly in one’s arms, typically to express affection” (“Hug” n. pag.). Even though a hug may be intended to convey love, it can also bring to life unacknowledged feelings.

His smile immediately disappears with my act of affection. This hug bestowed out of love results in rejecting body language, from the top of his slightly large and out of proportioned head straining away from the embrace, all the way to the dirty, worn-out, and chewed up shoelaces on his sneakers peeking out from the hem of his faded sky blue Slim Cut Wranglers bracing solidly against the floor. His entire body leans away during the embrace, almost to the point of breaking the hold, with definitely enough room for air to pass between the two participants, but not quite enough room to fit another four-foot six-inch nine-year-old in between. There’s enough space to be felt and noticed by me. Enough space to cause me to want to tighten my arms around his young and thin frame and close that distance with one small step. To close that distance and pick him up and say, “Why? Do I not spend enough time with you?”

Do I not spend enough money on you? Do I not teach you enough about life? What have I done to deserve this space?”

This is no small slit of space; it is not the kind of space that Duckie and Little Foot are referring to in the movie *The Land Before Time*, when they are hopping across cracks in the ground and singing “don’t step on a crack or you’ll fall and break your back.” The crack in our hug is wider than the Grand Canyon, longer than the Mississippi, colder than the globe’s melting icecaps, and deeper than Hell. That distance may as well be named Black Tar because no matter how much effort is exerted, no progress will be made trying to wade through the resilient barrier. It’s enough of a boundary to make the Great Wall of China look like a rickety, midget-sized picket fence.

While he resists my gifts of hugs, he dispenses a vast array of hugs, varying from the amount of time spent in the act, all the way to the amount of pressure exerted from his enveloping arms. His most brief, less than two-second hugs with nearly nonexistent pressure are granted to his three dogs and are usually followed up with a playful smack to their wiggling rumps. He gives his Mimi, Granny, Nanny, and Momo long and cuddly hugs, usually with his eyes closed and his head turned either completely to the right or left and mashed up against their full and comforting bosoms. His father receives the most enthusiastic hugs, with the hug actually beginning before physical contact is made; this is heart-wrenchingly beautiful to witness. He will spot his father and immediately sprint to him, shouting “Daddy!”, only slowing down on the last stride and leaping into his father’s strong, open arms. He shows attention and

consideration of his own weight and his father's surprise with this brief pause to prevent a collision of long arms and legs with thin hard bodies and shiny brown hair.

The most tender embrace is reserved for his mother. The levels of length and pressure often vary, but the intimacy and love are always consistent. No words are spoken because no words are needed. It's one of those moments that a person feels too embarrassed to watch, yet can't seem to look away, one of those moments that a person would feel uncomfortable about if caught watching.

I, on the other hand, am the recipient of either a type of hug that often competes with the dogs' speedy length of the careless act, or, if he senses that a longer hug is called for, a rough, long, and tight squeeze delivered around my waist, as if to choke the air from my throat. Ironically, "a squeezing grip in wrestling" is an alternate definition of a hug ("Hug" n. pag.). Who knew that so many different purposes and meanings could hide behind a single hug? My reward for putting my heart and soul into teaching him the ways of the world, things that my little man will need to know to be self sufficient? A squeezing grip in wrestling. Heaven forbid I try to return the hug; it is well-known that he will assume a touch-me-not posture.

For I am only a stepmother.

## Works Cited

“Hug.” *Oxford Dictionaries*. Oxford University Press, 2013. Web. 10 Nov. 2013.

*The Land Before Time*. Dir. Don Bluth. *Universal Studios*, 1988. Film.