

A Give in the Touch
Stephen J. Wallace

I slowly reached into the box and touched her hand. It wasn't cold, or warm. Not hard like a table or soft like a balloon. There was a give in the touch, kind of like a bag full of ground coffee that allows you to squeeze for just a bit, then refuses to give any more no matter how much you squeeze, or push, or beg. It was just like anything else you would touch; any other lifeless object. Kind of like her. Why did that side of her always take over? The hardened side, just below the surface. The side that automatically fought. The side that dragged the rest of her along. The side that saw a battle in every moment.

I tried to hold that hand years ago when we got pulled over by a policeman. I don't remember what we were doing, probably kissing. I had swerved, that I remember. The swerve, then the thud; a pothole beside the road. I remember now. The car jerked and it felt like she bit me. Slowing down, I turned on the inside light to see if my lip was bleeding. It wasn't, but I noticed that I had a streak of her lipstick on my cheek. We both laughed. That was the soft part on the surface. The part that I could squeeze ever so gently. Then we saw colorful lights and heard a siren behind us. A moment later we were parked by the side of the road, just feet from the pothole. As I saw the shadowy figure with a flat brimmed hat approaching our car, I could feel her transforming, hardening. I tried to gently squeeze her hand again but it would not give. As soon as I rolled the window down, there was no soft part of her left.

He stuck the head of the flashlight into the car and shined the beam on my face. "License and registration young man." He tucked the still shining light under his arm and took my license in one hand and the registration in the other. Scanning them, he breathed in deeply. "I've been following you for a while, watching you weave in and out of the lane. I thought you were drunk. When you hit the hole back there and swerved, I knew I had to pull you over." He handed my license back to me and shined the light in my face again. "What's on your cheek?"

"Uh, it's uh, lipstick," I forced out. I heard my voice, barely above a whisper, with a hint of embarrassment that I knew I felt but was surprised I could hear. He lowered the beam to my chest and handed the registration back to me. Even on the moonless night, I could faintly see his face in pulsating blue mixed with stray beams from his headlights. I thought I saw a faint smile. He gets the picture, maybe even does the make-out-as-you-drive things himself. He'll probably just give me a warning, maybe even just a verbal one. It's going to be ok.

"If someone had been coming the other way..."

"Can we go?" I heard a loud voice beside me. His flashlight shifted to her face at the same time my head spun. She was looking at him, not me. "Get that damned light out of my face." Both he and I froze. She leaned over me until she was inches from the light. He's not drunk, so let us go. We're late."

The beam dropped and I heard gravels crunching rapidly. Then we heard a forceful bang on the passenger side window. She exhaled as if bored and rolled down the window. "What'd you say young lady?"

"You heard me," she said dismissively. He grabbed the door handle and opened the door, only to have her grab the inside handle with both hands and pull it closed again forcefully. We heard a thud on the gravel, and I assume he dropped his flashlight.

“Step out of the car!” he bellowed. She started to reach for the door handle, but I grabbed her left arm that was resting on the console. For a minute I thought I had grabbed the metal console by mistake, but it was her arm. It was a rock, and I could feel her shaking. She stopped reaching for the door handle, sat back, and crossed her arms. I opened my door and met the policeman between the headlight beams behind my car and in front of his. The spinning blue lights from the top of his car were oscillating on him rhythmically, and when it hit his face I could see his large eyes and body rocking.

“What the hell was that?” He shined the light in my eyes and was inches from my face. The words got so loud so fast I couldn’t understand any of them. I saw his pulsating breath in the chilly air and felt occasional drops of spit on my face as he screamed. So many times I had taken her side, even when I knew she was wrong. So many times I took the path of least resistance, acting like I was as upset as she was and attacking the target of her rage just to avoid her rage myself. But not tonight. There was more at stake tonight than just being rude to someone or betraying my true feelings just to pretend to match hers. “I’m sorry,” I kept saying softly, looking down.

“You better get her under control,” he said between heavy breaths. “If I ever pull you over again and this happens, you’re both in trouble.”

“Yes sir,” I said just above a whisper.

The ride home that night was excruciating. “Did you hear what he said about me?” I didn’t respond, wondering if any part of her would change because of what she heard from him or others who had similar thoughts during one of her episodes. Wondering if any of their words could penetrate the iron armor she carried and perhaps seep into her soft spot, the spot that gave just a bit before her arsenal engaged.

“A man would stand up for his woman.” I would usually let it go, but not tonight. Tonight I would have regretted avoiding her wrath more than incurring it.

“Not when she’s a crazy psycho who can’t get along with anybody!”

“I’m getting out,” she screamed, reaching to open the door while the car was moving. For the second time that night, I had to grab her and hold her in place to keep her from flying out the door. I held on until we got into her driveway, when I finally let go. She dropped her keys trying to force them in the door and started banging with both hands. The small light beside the door came on. Her mother opened the door. I saw them talking, and pointing at me. After a moment her mother hugged her and gently pulled her into the house. She scowled at me in the car and slammed the door shut. Perhaps her mother accepted her version, the premise that the rage should be directed at me, that I somehow deserved it. Maybe her mother did the same thing I did, accept her anger so she didn’t become a target of it.

Sometime after that she invited me to a party. I think that was the last time I ever saw her. I agreed to meet her there. There were pockets of friends sharing stories and laughing, sharing snacks on plastic plates and drinks in red cups. But at the kitchen counter where she was, it was different. No one was smiling. I tried to work my way into the conversation, but no one would say anything except her, and it was a complaint about something: The food, the drinks, the temperature. When I decided to leave I went to hug her, just because. I moved close and gently

put my hand on her shoulder. But she brought her red cup up to her chest between us so I backed away.

It was often like that. I remember seeing her posts online long after we separated. I could see that any traces of the soft side had vanished. When I ran into someone who knew her, they would mention her. Sometimes it involved an altercation at work, or with a family member. There was the occasional mention of a court appearance, or a restraining order against her latest love interest, or breaking out of the facility. Apparently she always swore it was the last time. She would occasionally find religion and proclaim the end of those parts of herself, but then, more stories. There were variations in the intensity, settings, and consequences, but it was always some version of the same story.

Then there was the letter, about a year ago. It came from nowhere: an actual letter. A four page letter, not typed but handwritten. Somehow she found me. I was almost shaking when I opened the envelope, but there were tender words from the first to the last. Words that were cradling, comforting, dare I say—soft. I read it while I was sipping coffee. She didn't mention the drugs and the rehab and the jobs and the restraining orders. She only hinted at them by saying she made bad choices after we split. Parts of it sounded like boilerplate from a 12 step program, but other parts sounded like, for the first time in all those years, the soft side was back.

I heard a throat clear behind me as my eyes drifted to the spread of pink flowers behind the coffin. I'm sure on some level they blame me for all this. It would be easy to. I guess seeing someone move to avoid a punch can look like they are throwing one if you view it from a different angle. I didn't look at them when I walked in, but I could almost feel the gasp.

I can't stay any longer. They need to morn. They were there all those years. I wasn't. That is probably why I assume they blame me. I couldn't stay. The hardness of the hard overwhelmed the softness, and when you feel that and can leave, you do. I did. I went back over it many times. That last conversation. No screams, no yelling, no outrage. But it was too late, at least I thought it was too late. At that point, I felt like trying to soften her would only harden me; that loving her would require hating me. So I left.

They probably even wonder why I came today. I do too. When I heard about it, the final battle with herself that she lost, I knew I had to come. I wasn't looking for closure, or an ending. I just had be here. Maybe by being here I could remind others, or myself, of the soft side. Maybe not.

And now, I have to go. I hear shuffling behind me that seems to get louder. I don't want to sign a memory book, I don't want to reconcile, I don't want to speculate on 'what if,' I just want to leave. But one last thing. I bend over and press my lips against her forehead. As I raised up, I felt my cheek wet and warm. Before I caught it, a drop hit her chin just beside her dimple, and blended with the makeup to leave a small stain that looked like a drop of coffee.

Stephen J. Wallace is a speaker, teacher, author, and entrepreneur. He has written several technical articles and a book chapter, and has given presentations related to industrial safety all over the world. He says he is a "writer trapped in an engineer's body, or vice versa." He enjoys writing poems and short stories, and recently finished his first novel, Shelter in Place, a thriller about the aftermath of an explosion in a chemical plant. He has lived in the Washington, DC

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