



He Always Touches Her

a new literary fiction novel

A. C. Wallace

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It was a cold winter night, and Trapper lay against her in the dark the way he had laid against her every night for three years.

Athena always told him it drove her crazy. She didn't know yet that he needed it — that some nights, with the snow ticking against the window and the house gone quiet around them, the warm shape of her was the only thing in the world that still reminded him of who he used to be. He pressed his head into the curve of her shoulder. She mumbled something in her sleep and didn't push him away. He counted that as a small mercy.

At three in the morning, like always, he got up to walk the house.

Front door. Hall. The window in the kitchen where the streetlight came through. The back door, the basement stairs, the office where her papers sat in stacks. Nothing. Same as every night. He had been doing this since the first night he came to live with her, and he meant to do it every night until — well. He didn't know what came after. He'd given up guessing.

He walked back to the bedroom and pressed himself in against her again. She was warm. She smelled like the lavender soap she'd been using all winter. He closed his eyes.

At six twenty-eight, the clock on her nightstand clicked over to six twenty-nine, and he decided that was close enough.

He touched her shoulder.

Nothing.

He touched her again, firmer this time, the way you'd nudge someone you really did want to wake up.

“I'm awake,” Athena said into her pillow, and reached back without opening her eyes to touch the top of his head. “I'm awake, Trap. Stop. Stop.”

She wasn't awake. Not really. He let her have another minute. He had waited three years to be the thing pressed against her

shoulder in the morning, and a minute longer didn't cost him anything.

When she finally sat up and put her feet on the cold floor, he watched her do it the way he watched her do it every morning — the small sigh, the stretch, the way her hand went automatically to the back of her neck like she was checking for something that wasn't there. He wondered, not for the first time, what she thought she was checking for.

She went to the bathroom first. Then the long pause where she sat on the edge of the bed and stared at nothing. He used to wonder if she was praying. Now he thought it was something else, something she didn't have a word for yet. Something that was waiting in her, the way he was waiting, in her hallway.

Coffee. The grinder is going in the kitchen. The smell of it filling the house. He liked her best after her first cup, when the edges came off her and she would talk to him the way you talk to someone you love.

Shower. Fifteen minutes of water running behind the closed door. He waited in the hall.

“Good morning, Trapper,” she said when she came out, towel-wrapped and damp, and the warmth of it went all the way through him, the same way it had the very first morning, three years ago, when he was still new to her and still hoping she would somehow recognize him.

She hadn't. Of course she hadn't. He had stopped expecting it a long time ago.

She kept talking as she walked to the bedroom — about her paper, about the weather, about something one of her professors had said — and he followed her in and hopped up onto the stool beside the bed to watch her get dressed. This was his favorite part of any morning, and the worst part of any morning, and he had made his peace with the fact that those were the same thing.

She caught his eye in the mirror as she pulled her sweater over her head.

“You are not helping, Trap.”

He blinked at her slowly. She blinked back. She didn't know she did that, but she did it every morning, and he had been collecting those slow blinks for three years like a man collecting coins for a fare he wasn't sure would ever be charged.

She finished her hair. She hung up the towel. She poured the last of the coffee into a travel mug, pulled on her coat, and bent down at the back door to scratch the spot between his ears — the spot only she ever touched, the spot that on bad nights he still thought might be the place where the spell was tied.

“Okay, Trapper. I'm off to class. Be a good boy. See you tonight.”

She closed the door behind her. He listened to the car start, the sound of it pull away and move down the street and silence rush in to take its place. Then he padded down the hall to her office, jumped up onto the pillow by the window, and waited.

She came home early.

He heard the car in the driveway, long before he should have heard it — two hours early, maybe three — and he was up off the pillow and into the hall before the key turned in the lock. Something was wrong. Or something was right. He couldn't tell yet which.

“Hey, Trap.” She set her bag down by the door and didn't look at him quite the way she usually did. “Class got cancelled. I'm going to work on my paper.”

He stared at her.

She looked the same. The same jeans, the same sweater she'd pulled on that morning, the same red mark on her thumb from where she'd burned it on the kettle two days ago. The same Athena. Except.

Except there was a softness around her edges that he didn't have a name for. A blurriness, almost, like looking at her through water. The hair at her temples lifted very slightly when she moved,

as if the room had a draft no one else could feel. The cat in him noticed it as a wrongness, the way cats notice weather. The other part of him — the part that had been a man once, the part that remembered — noticed it as something else entirely.

He followed her down the hall to the office. She sat down at her computer and didn't seem to register that he was watching her with both his eyes. She put her headphones on. She started to type.

He jumped up onto the pillow by the window, the way he did every afternoon, and curled his tail around himself. But he didn't sleep. He couldn't. He sat there and watched her, and after a few minutes — slowly, slowly, the way the dawn came up the air around her shoulders began to shimmer.

Pale at first. Then green.

A soft, steady, beautiful green, the color of moss in spring, the color of the river at dusk, the color of every old story his grandmother had ever told him about the women in their family and what they could do and what they would one day become.

It was happening. After three years, it was finally happening.

Athena typed on, oblivious. The light moved around her like breath.

Trapper watched her from the pillow and waited for her to look up.