

BEN FOWLKES

You'll Apologize If You Have To

Wallace went all the way to Florida to fight a Brazilian middleweight he'd never heard of for ten thousand dollars. That's what it had come to.

The Brazilian's name was Thiago something, but everyone called him Cavalo. From what Wallace had gathered, it had something to do with a movie or a TV show that only Brazilian people knew about. No one cared enough to explain it any more than that and anyway Wallace wasn't overly interested. Everything he needed to know about the guy's game he could tell just from looking at him. He had shoulders that looked welded on, a neck that existed mostly in theory. The kind of guy who'd be hell on wheels in a street fight.

"If you take him down, flatten him out, and feed him some elbows," Coach Vee said, "my guess is he'll start thinking of all the other places he'd rather be."

Wallace said he got the message.

"Good," Coach Vee said. "Because I don't feel like repeating it all night."

Right off Cavalo clipped the top of Wallace's head with a glancing left hook. It felt like someone had thrown a phone book at his head and just missed. A follow-up right set off flashbulbs behind his eyes. Enough of this, Wallace decided.

The last thing he remembered was backing Cavalo up against the cage and seeing the Brazilian set his feet. There, Wallace thought. He dropped for the double-leg. The next instant he was looking into Coach Vee's face. It seemed to hover all alone in a field of light. He was saying something to Wallace, but the sounds didn't quite match up with the movement of his lips.

"I said just stay down, relax for a second," Coach Vee said.

Wallace asked him what he meant by *stay* down. They were both standing up.

Coach Vee winced at him.

"Oh," Wallace said, lifting his head up to look around. "Fuck me."

One ear felt like it was plugged up with wax. The other rang with a high metallic whine. Somewhere off where he couldn't see, Cavalo and his coaches were singing in Portuguese. It took him a second to understand that the field of light around Coach Vee's face was coming from the ceiling.

"Head kick," Coach Vee told him later, back at the hotel. "Caught you right as you were changing levels."

There were two narrow beds in the hotel room. Wallace sat on one and Coach Vee sat on

the other. They were both drinking Miller High Life tallboys. A movie with Denzel Washington was on the TV.

“Caught you flush, too.”

Wallace thanked him for clarifying that part.

The left side of his head felt like it had been dug out with a spoon. He pressed the beer can to his temple but it was nowhere near cold enough to do anything. On the TV Denzel was yelling at some guys in a submarine.

“Timed it really well, is the thing,” Coach Vee said. “Right as you were coming in. Bang.”

“What are you, his publicist now?” Wallace said. He took a big gulp of his beer. It tasted of aluminum. It was shit.

“Hey,” Coach Vee said. “You asked how it happened.”

Had he? Wallace didn’t remember. He tried to trace the conversation back to its beginning but couldn’t. Then he tried to remember where they’d gotten the beers and he couldn’t do that either. It was like trying to reel yourself in on a rope only to get halfway there and realize it’d been cut. He knew this happened to some guys after a knockout, but it had never happened to him. He’d never been knocked all the way out before. Not like that. Not out-out. Now that he had, he couldn’t recommend the experience.

They flew back to San Diego the next day. Five hours vacuum-packed into coach seats. Wallace pretended to sleep so he didn’t have to watch the stewardesses willing themselves not to stare at the giant bruise on the side of his head. Coach’s wife

picked them up at the airport and gave Wallace a ride down to his place in Imperial Beach. She asked once how Florida was and when no one said anything neither did she. They drove most of the way like that.

Wallace spent the next three days alone in his condo, sitting in the dark and feeling sorry for himself. He let his cell phone ring until it died and then made a point of not plugging it in. He watched whatever was on TV. He made a couple attempts at getting drunk, but it wouldn’t take. He iced his head until the swelling started going down, leaving behind a darkening triangle of tissue along his temple. It looked like he’d had an accident while ironing.

After three days he’d had enough. He had to do something, get outside, take a walk. Look, he told himself while standing at the sliding glass door to his deck. It’s a beautiful fucking day.

He put on his shoes and rolled a joint to keep him company. He didn’t want to risk it on the beach, where there might be people, so instead he headed off into the estuary that started in back of the condos and ran all the way down to Mexico like one long green finger pointing the way out. There was a dirt path that dead-ended in about a dozen places, depending on the water level, before eventually snaking its way to the big houses with ocean views on the other side. People didn’t go back in the estuary often. The people in the condos looked out on it every day and the people in the big houses on the other side probably never did. They hadn’t paid all that money to be close to a salt-water swamp. They

paid to look out at the beach. That was fine with Wallace. He lit his joint as he walked.

He'd seen a heron back there once. That had been something. It was back when he first bought the condo, his first year in the Big Show, the same year his daughter was born. He fought three times in Vegas that year. He made a half-million dollars just in purses and bonuses alone. It seemed like only the beginning of the wonderful things that were going to happen for him. Then one day he goes walking in the estuary and rounds a corner right into this enormous bird. He stopped cold, no more than ten feet away. The heron just stood there on long, ridiculous legs, then lifted its wings, big as car doors, and took off. Wallace could hear it chopping at the air as it disappeared toward Mexico.

He thought about the heron as he smoked and walked and let the sun fall on the bruised part of his face. It felt all right. The joint didn't hurt either. He took a long pull on it and when he looked up he saw a man in a big green jacket, too heavy for the weather, coming up the path toward him. Wallace let the hand with the joint fall casually to his side and tried to tilt his head so that his bruise wouldn't be so noticeable. When the man got close Wallace nodded and moved to pass on one side. The man stepped in front of him and stopped.

"So you're the one who's been smoking weed back here," the man in the green jacket said. He said it with a smile on his face, but it didn't look to Wallace like a smile that was meant to convey any form of happiness.

Wallace still had the joint in his hand. He looked at it stupidly, like it might somehow vanish, then he looked back at the man. The man had thick, dark hair and the cool kind of glasses, the kind people who didn't need glasses might wear. He stared at Wallace like he really expected an answer. Wallace agreed that he was, in fact, smoking weed back here.

"But I wouldn't say I've *been* doing it," he said.

"No?" the man said. "What would you say, then?"

"I'd say I've smoked back here once or twice," Wallace said.

"One or twice?" the man said. "That's an interesting answer, isn't it?"

Wallace said nothing.

"Are you saying this is the second time, right here?" the man said. "Or are you saying this is the once? Because it seems like you'd remember if it was your first time."

Wallace didn't care for his tone. The man couldn't have been much older than he was. Mid-thirties, maybe. Definitely not past forty. He wasn't a cop. He seemed too hip, or too something. There was no question of whether Wallace could take him, but the last thing he needed was to get into something physical. This didn't seem like the kind of dude you got into a scrap with. This seemed like the kind of dude you assaulted.

Wallace licked his fingertips and pinched the joint out before slipping it in the back pocket of his jeans.

"There," he said to the man. "We good?"

The man looked at him.

"I live right over there," the man said, pointing at a big yellow house on the other side of the estuary. "So I smell it when someone smokes weed back here. My kids smell it. There's no way *not* to smell it. You get what I'm saying?"

"You're saying that you smell it," Wallace said.

"Can you not understand how this would be a problem?" the man said.

Wallace said he understood that the man lived in the yellow house over there and that his kids smelled it when people smoked weed. He said he understood all this perfectly.

"Where do you live?" the man said. "Those apartments?"

"They're condos," Wallace said.

"How about if I came over there and blazed up in front of your kids? How would you like that?"

Wallace chuckled to himself. It was the only way to keep from slapping the man's cool glasses off his face. He'd been having such a nice day, too. His first in a while. His high was slipping away and he could hear his own pulse in his ears. *Now, now, now*, went his heartbeat. It'd take him hours to calm back down. It'd fuck up his whole afternoon. He could see it, rolling out in front of him like an old rug.

"Let's agree that you made your point and I learned my lesson," Wallace said. "And then let's get the hell out of each other's way before one of us does something we'll both regret."

The man stood there. He looked at Wallace and then nodded as if a question had just been answered.

"So this is what you do, huh?" the man said, still nodding. "A weekday morning, and this is what you do. Just walk around smoking weed in public. It must be nice."

"It's better than nice," Wallace said.

"Oh, I bet it is," the man said again.

Wallace liked his tone even less now.

"What happened to your face?" the man said

"Work," Wallace said.

"Sure," the man said and laughed a mean, bitter laugh. "I'll bet that's why you're out here smoking weed in the middle of the day. Because you're so busy with work, right?"

That did it. Wallace clapped his hand on the man's shoulder, grabbing a handful of his green jacket. The man didn't move except to turn his head and look at Wallace's hand, his eyes going wide like a giant insect had just landed on him. Wallace grabbed the man's opposite sleeve with his other hand.

"Here's what's happening now," Wallace said.

He used a simple foot sweep to sit the man down just off to the side of the trail. It was like he was watching himself do it. The man landed hard and sunk down to his elbows in mud. His face was all confusion and panic, just perfect. Wallace could tell that it hadn't even occurred to him that this had been a possible outcome.

"Oh what the Christ," the man said. Silty mud washed up over his lap. He tried to sit up and only sank further. "Christ!" he said again.

Yeah, Wallace thought, that's going to be trouble. But there it was. He turned on his heels and started back the way he'd come. Behind

him he could hear the sucking sound of the man pulling himself out of the mud. The man swore in stupid, broken off threats at his back. Wallace decided he was going to let the man say whatever he wanted to say. That was a choice he was making.

Wallace took the joint out of his pocket as he walked out and lit it up again. He slowed down so the man could see as he tilted his head back and exhaled the smoke in one luxurious stream. He was four days out from a knockout loss and I-don't-give-a-fuck had settled in.

He spent the next hour standing around in his condo, trying to figure out what to do next. He plugged in his phone and it lit up with all the stuff he'd been avoiding. A voicemail from Coach Vee, asking Wallace to let him know he hadn't died in his sleep. A voicemail from his ex-girlfriend Kim, telling him he'd missed his day to pick up his daughter. A couple texts from some reporter who wanted to talk about the fight. He put the phone in his pocket and decided not to think about it anymore.

He went and looked out the sliding glass door to see if there was any commotion in the estuary. He saw the same dull green mass he looked at every day. If this guy is the type to let something like this go, he told himself, you'll spend the next couple days stressing for nothing. If he's some other type, he's probably already on the phone to the cops, his lawyer, whoever.

Not like it would be hard to find Wallace. Show up to the condos where he'd idiotically

admitted to living and ask around for the guy with the cauliflower ear and the giant bruise on the side of his head. It'd take them all of five minutes to zero in on him, and then what? Was that assault? Probably. Everything was these days. Maybe it wasn't the kind of thing you went to jail for, but it would be expensive and dumb and an utter pain in the ass. Plus you did it to yourself for no good reason. And just wait until one of those blogs gets ahold of it. Pro fighter gets knocked out cold in the cage, then comes home and bullies some local yuppie. What a career move.

He got sick of hanging around and waiting so he went up to Coronado to see his daughter. The drive took ten minutes and ended in a different world. Coronado was somewhere people lived on purpose. Old people walked the sidewalks like they were keeping an eye on things. Even the dogs had nice haircuts.

Kim lived with their daughter Molly in a big house paid for by Kim's husband, a lawyer in a downtown firm. He was too old for Kim but he was loving and fair and kind to Wallace's daughter in a way that made Wallace feel like every decision he'd ever made with his own life had been wrong. They had the Pacific Ocean and 150 feet of sand for a front lawn. They couldn't complain.

Kim was on the patio when he pulled up. She had the detached nozzle for a garden hose in one hand and an unopened juice box in the other. Her eyes followed Molly as she stalked through the hedges, a plastic Tupperware container

outstretched in her hands. It was not quite noon and the marine layer had just finished burning off. Wallace had to squint through the brightness to read their expressions.

“What happened to your face?” Kim asked him.

He smiled at her and then knelt down to Molly’s level. She held the Tupperware in front of her eyes as if she were trying to hide behind it.

“Hello Mol,” he said.

She looked at him through the Tupperware. She didn’t say anything.

“We’re hunting for lizards,” Kim explained. “We could kill an entire morning this way. We have, more than once.”

“I see,” Wallace said. “Can I play?”

Molly stared straight through him and didn’t answer. This was one of her new things, not talking to him. He felt like it was probably meant to get him to do all the talking, or maybe to punish him. He looked at her big eyes and felt exposed. They stood there that way until Kim touched Molly lightly on the top of the head. Molly took it as a signal that she was free to resume the lizard hunt. Wallace watched her go and all he felt was relief.

“We waited for you all day on Sunday,” Kim said.

“About that,” Wallace said.

“I’m guessing there’s a story here that also explains the state of your face,” she said.

Wallace told her he had a fight in Florida. He left it at that.

Kim had been around enough fighters to

know that if he’d won, he’d have mentioned it already. That was a rule you could count on. Some guy went out to Vegas for a fight and if he won he’d be back in the gym on Monday, not even training, just giving everyone a chance to ask him about it, hear the story of his triumph. If he lost you wouldn’t see him for a week. When you did see him, he wouldn’t mention the fight. If you asked him how it went, he’d say it went shitty and leave it at that.

“We’ve got to figure something out here,” Kim said. “You can’t just stand her up like that and then show up when you feel like it.”

“I know,” Wallace said.

“You think she doesn’t really notice but she does,” Kim said.

“I know,” Wallace said again.

“This age, you never know what will end up sticking with them for the rest of their lives,” Kim said. “I mean, come on, look at me and my dad.”

By all means, Wallace told her. Let’s go ahead and make this about that now.

Kim looked at him like she was trying to decide whether it was worth summoning the energy to get angry. Over by the hedges Molly clamped the Tupperware down over some invisible prisoner, then looked back to see if she was being watched.

I made this possible for you, Wallace thought. It’s because of me that you can marry a rich lawyer and stay home all day in a big house. You lived with a fighter once and had his baby and followed him into all sorts of bad decisions, so now no one can say you were always boring and domestic.

But that was a shitty way of making himself feel better. Because even if you're right, he told himself, so what?

"You could take her for a little while today," Kim said. "Make up for the weekend you missed, maybe even let her stay the night at your place. She likes that."

Wallace pictured his condo, pictured flinging open the door for Molly, her crinkling her nose at the cloistered stink of three days worth of grown man wallowing. Or better yet, what if the cops came by? A nice man in a crisp blue uniform knocking on his door to talk about the morning Wallace had spent smoking weed in public and throwing people in the mud. That'd make a great story for Mol to tell in therapy some day. The kind of story that starts, "The last time I saw my dad . . ."

"Why don't you just say you don't want to do it?" Kim said when she saw his face. "At least then I can pretend to respect your honesty."

"It's not the best time," he said.

"It never is," Kim said.

"Fuck it," Wallace said.

He told her about the thing in the estuary. He told it just how it happened, exaggerating his own patience and the other man's obnoxiousness only slightly. When he got to the part about foot-sweeping the man into the mud, Kim looked away from him and shook her head twice in a tight, mean pivot. Wallace said it wasn't that big a deal. It's not like he hit him. It's not like the man was actually, physically hurt.

"Right," Kim said. "It's so unimportant you're

afraid you're going to get arrested when you go home."

It didn't sound to Wallace like a question, so he didn't answer.

"And you were stoned, too? Walking around with a joint like some teenager? Then you drove here, presumably still stoned? And to see your daughter? I mean, what the hell."

"I didn't have a chance to get stoned," Wallace said. "It might have been a lot better for that guy if I did."

"That's why you drove up here rather than just calling, isn't it?" Kim said. "Because you think you might be in trouble and you'd rather not be there for it."

There wasn't anything good he could say.

"God, do you know how boring this kind of thing is now?" she said. "Do you know how stupid?"

Wallace said he did. He was surprised at how much he meant it.

Molly came running around the corner, holding the Tupperware over her head and keeping it very still as she ran. When she got to where they were standing she extended it up to show them. It was filled with tiny pebbles, and in the center was a snail with a partially crushed shell that oozed air bubbles. Molly's grin beamed out at them. When she saw Wallace looking at her she stopped grinning, then motioned for her mother to lean down so she could whisper to her. Kim did it. Molly watched him as she spoke into her mother's ear.

"Yeah, no," Kim answered her. "That's not

going to happen.”

Molly made a face like she might cry, then turned and raced off with the Tupperware over her head again. Something felt like it was draining out of him as he watched her.

“She wants the snail to sleep in her bed with her,” Kim said once she’d gone. “She doesn’t want me to tell you about it.”

“And yet here we are,” Wallace said.

It was quiet then and Wallace could hear the sound of the ocean drifting across the street at them. The water even *sounded* cleaner up here. He couldn’t understand it. Kim asked him what he was going to do now. Wallace said he’d probably take the rest of the week off, then get back in the gym on Monday and start thinking about the next one.

“That wasn’t at all what I meant,” Kim said. “But I guess you answered my question anyway.”

That’s how you know these visits are over, Wallace told himself. When you’ve both reminded each other why you don’t do this more often.

He was two blocks from home when he spotted the cop car out front.

Fuck, fuck, fuck, fuck, he thought.

There was just one of them, pulled up to the curb with nobody in it, near as he could tell. He drove right on past and tried to look like he wasn’t looking. There was no sign of any actual cop. No sign of a commotion in the courtyard. Just the car.

Haven’t there been cop cars parked out front

every now and then, he asked himself. Wasn’t that something that happened sometimes? Maybe it had nothing at all to do with him.

He kept driving. The afternoon was heating up. Ahead of him the freeway shimmered. He drove past it, on into Chula Vista. He didn’t even know he was driving to the gym until he pulled into the parking lot.

Coach Vee was leaning up against the back wall of the gym watching two lazy heavyweights pretend to spar. Wallace went over and leaned next to him without a word. The heavyweights moved like two men miming a fight in the shallow end of a pool. The act of keeping their hands up seemed to exhaust them both.

“Somebody please hit someone,” Coach Vee said to the heavyweights. “Pretty fucking please.”

One of the heavyweights pumped a few jabs, then stepped back and took a deep breath.

“You two are literally killing me,” Coach Vee said. “It’s a goddamn travesty what you’re doing to me right now.”

The heavyweights both hooked at the same time. Neither of them hit anything.

Coach looked at Wallace and shook his head. “For my sins,” he said.

The round timer dinged. Coach Vee threw his head back and thanked Christ in heaven. Wallace followed him over the wrestling mats and into his cramped little office without being asked. The heavyweights both leaned over at the waist with their gloved hands on their knees.

“So you’re alive,” Coach Vee said and plopped down in his cheap leather office chair.

He had his laptop open on his desk. The word 'Commitment' bounced around the empty black screen, running into the edges and then spinning back out toward the center. Coach Vee's office always made Wallace feel a little claustrophobic. All four walls were plastered with fight photos and magazine covers. The faces pressed in on you. You got more than two people in there at once and everybody had to flatten against the wall just to let someone out.

"I was this close to sending out the search party," Coach said.

Wallace told him he'd listened to his voicemails, but didn't feel like they demanded immediate action.

"Even the one where I said, 'Call me back' like three or four times at the end?" Coach Vee said.

Wallace grinned. He could be sixty years old and Coach Vee would still have the ability to make him feel like he was Dennis the Menace, running around with a slingshot in his back pocket.

"I'm just saying," Coach said. "Guy suffers a concussion and then falls off the map, least he could do is call his coach and let him know he's not facedown in the bathtub waiting for the neighbors to notice the stink."

"Well. At least you're not being overly dramatic or anything," Wallace said.

"Sure," Coach Vee said. "No big deal. Just a knockout, right? It happens."

Wallace knew what was coming next.

"Of course," Coach Vee said and leaned back in his chair, letting his eyes drift up the wall past

the framed photos of Coach with past champs, Coach in his own glory days, all the way up to the one of Wallace getting the sweat knocked off his head by a straight right from Vladimir Zinoviev.

"It didn't used to," Coach said.

The photo was close to a decade old by now, torn out of a magazine and shoved into a Wal-Mart frame. Zinoviev was a hard-ass ex-Soviet special forces guy who broke Wallace's orbital in the first minute of the first round out in Atlantic City. Within seconds the swelling nixed his vision in that eye. His depth perception was shit after that. By the start of the second round he felt like he had a water balloon growing out of his face. Coach Vee had told him to make it a ground fight, take it where he could feel rather than see, and he did. He choked Zinoviev out with a rear naked in the third, then spent the next week in New Jersey because they wouldn't let him get on an airplane with his eye like that.

All he had to do now was think about that punch and a glowing warmth would spread out across his face, beginning right on that very spot. It was like his body had its own memory of these things that he couldn't quite access. After that fight Coach Vee told a reporter that it wouldn't have mattered if Zinoviev had hit Wallace with a shovel, he was too stubborn to get knocked out. Wallace understood right away that it was the highest compliment Coach Vee was capable of giving. It was still the only picture on Coach's little Wall of Fame where his fighter wasn't demolishing the other guy or grinning after a

victory. The only photo where Coach's guy seems to be the one getting his ass handed to him.

"I should have called you back," Wallace said. "You're right about that."

"I know I am," Coach Vee said. "But you were too busy feeling sorry for yourself. Like you're the first fighter who ever got knocked out in a fight he never should have taken."

Wallace laughed to himself. How many times had he heard Coach telling guys to step up and fight? How many times had he heard that spiel about how you didn't make any money sitting on your couch? But that was before a fight. It wasn't until after that things became so very crystal clear to everyone else.

"Be straight with me, how many more of these are we going to do?" Coach asked him.

Wallace shook his head.

"Bet you've wondered the same thing though, right?" Coach said. "I know you have. Tell me something: when you walked into the gym today, how'd it smell?"

"Like dreams and sunshine," Wallace said. "As always."

"It smelled awful, didn't it?" Coach Vee said. "It made you sick, right? Like you wanted to run out of here and get a shower?"

Wallace didn't say anything. The truth is that's exactly how it felt, like the stench of old, mildewed leather was sticking to his skin. That smell of stale sweat, other people's feet. That same fight gym smell, but worse. Coach leaned forward and stretched his long arms out on the desk between them. He smiled that sad,

conspiratorial smile of his.

"When the smell of the gym makes you sick," Coach said very slowly, emphasizing each syllable, "it's time to quit. I think Marciano said that. I don't know, maybe not Marciano. But whoever said it was right. When you start to hate that smell, it's time. And when it's time, brother." Coach held up his hands and let them drop. Wallace opened his mouth to say something, then didn't. Start talking now, he thought, and you might not be able to stop.

All he needed was a little while to collect himself. He needed a day or two with no Coach Vee, no Kim and no Molly, no asshole neighbor. He needed a second to breathe. He needed some time to figure some things out, and he knew he wasn't going to get it.

Coach Vee leaned back in his chair again and looked up at the photo of Wallace and Zinoviev.

"Wonder what ever happened to that guy," Coach Vee said.

In the photo Zinoviev wore a blank expression and a flat-top that was severe and well out of fashion even then. The halo of sweat around Wallace's head glimmered in the arena lights. There was that warm glow on his cheek again.

"I heard he's a small-time gangster in Brooklyn now," Wallace said, his voice thick and all in his throat.

"Seriously?" Coach Vee said.

"That's what I heard," Wallace said. He said the rumor was that Zinoviev had gone back to work as hired muscle for the same guys he used to serve under in the Soviet army. Or maybe

he'd never really stopped working for them, even when he was fighting. Anyway, that was his life now, or so people said.

"Isn't that something," Coach Vee said. "Guy changes continents and still ends up with the same friends."

On his way out Wallace passed the two heavyweights sitting on the floor with their backs leaning against the wall, slowly unspooling their hand wraps as the sweat puddled up around them. Wallace nodded at them and one of them asked how his fight in Florida went.

"Shitty," Wallace said.

They'd given him a watch once, the Big Show had. He hadn't thought about it in years, but now, driving around by himself, he remembered it.

It was a nice one, too. Cartier, with diamonds in more places than Wallace had thought possible. He'd never asked for it. No one explained what it was for.

This was back when he was first fighting in the Big Show, after he'd won three straight and people were starting to talk about a title shot. Then, out of nowhere, they had this watch delivered to him. Like, *here*. It wasn't his birthday, wasn't Christmas. His last fight had been two months earlier. The box the thing came in seemed nicer than any luggage Wallace had ever owned. He was scared to take it out. He didn't even wear watches.

He asked his manager to find out who he could thank for it, and maybe see if he could sniff out

a reason for it. His manager called back later that day to say it was all taken care of. It didn't seem right, but fine. His manager told him he'd have to get used to stuff like this, that when you're a winner people give you things. They want to. You don't owe them anything for it.

Wallace believed this at the time. That's how dumb he'd been.

Probably about a year later he saw where a lightweight who'd just been cut from the Big Show was trying to sell the exact same watch on eBay. He told the story about how the promoters had given it to him for being their top lightweight prospect, how it was one of a kind, custom-made specially for him. The bidding got up there, then it got ridiculous. In the end the bids were all bullshit, just mean smart kids fucking with him on the internet. He never got a dime for it.

Wallace still had his, still in the box in the back of his sock drawer. He couldn't say why. He had the vague feeling that he might need it some day. Maybe he just wanted to know it was there, this watch, a piece of secret evidence. It proved that he'd done something, at least. He hadn't made it all up.

The big yellow house had a huge wooden door and a front yard made of volcanic rocks. Wallace stood on the sidewalk looking at, trying to imagine what kind of world existed inside. He'd just had enough, was what it was. There was no breeze coming off the ocean and the heat had flattened the afternoon out, leaving it limp and heavy. Whatever was going to happen, Wallace

wanted to get it over with.

You'll apologize if you have to, he told himself. Then he said it out loud, just so he'd believe it.

Wallace went up and rang the doorbell. Behind the door a little dog barked, clipping its nails across a tile floor as it got closer. A woman told it to hush and it did. Wallace realized he hadn't even considered what he was going to say if someone other than the man in the green jacket answered. He really should have thought about that.

An old woman in a floral print robe pulled the door open just enough to see him. She held the little dog back with her foot. She had thin, bleached hair and the rough, thick skin of a person who'd been willfully abused by the sun for decades. Her eyes were hidden somewhere deep inside her face where Wallace couldn't quite see. She stood there as if waiting for a sales pitch of some kind. Wallace realized he didn't know the man's name, didn't know how to ask for him.

"Is there a man who lives here?" he asked.

"What's happened?" the woman snapped.

Wallace didn't know how to answer that.

"What's he done?" the woman said.

Wallace told her that it wasn't exactly like that. He needed to talk to him, he said.

"We had a misunderstanding earlier," Wallace said. "It was my fault. I wanted to apologize."

The old woman looked down at her dog, as if checking to make sure he'd heard the same thing she had.

"Is this a trick?" she said.

Wallace told her no, it wasn't a trick. She

looked at him for what felt like a long time, then she looked down at the little dog.

"We're going to trust this man and let him in to talk to us," she said to the dog. "We're going to trust him and hope he is worthy of that."

Please, Wallace thought. Don't you be crazy. I'm not sure I can handle it right now.

The woman led him into the living room. As he followed her across the tile floors he realized how small she was. Her floral robe trailed on the floor behind her. She stopped in the living room and turned to Wallace like she'd forgotten what they'd come in there for. She suggested that they sit out on the back patio and talk. It was nice out there, she explained. There was shade, and when the wind shifted the right way they could smell the ocean.

"It's delightful," she said and closed her eyes. "Just delightful."

That's when Wallace realized she was drunk. He figured it was better than crazy, but only by a little. The woman told him she was having some pineapple juice and asked him if he'd like a glass.

"I don't want to trouble you," Wallace said.

"It's no trouble," she said. "I like vodka in mine. How do you take yours?"

Wallace said that would be fine. He watched her pull a giant bottle out of the freezer and then pour the thick, syrupy vodka into their glasses. Wallace could smell the booze before he even brought it close to his mouth. He followed her to a glass table on the back patio. The shade from the awning enveloped them.

"I'll tell you right now, it's not often that

people come here to talk about my husband and think that they should be the ones apologizing,” the woman said when they sat down.

Wallace felt himself flinch at the word husband. She had to be at least thirty years older than the man he’d gotten into it with. He wondered whether he’d gotten the wrong place, whether he wasn’t caught up in the middle of some big misunderstanding.

“I know,” the woman said. “You think I don’t recognize that look?”

“I didn’t mean anything,” Wallace said.

“I can spot that look from across the street,” the woman said. “But I don’t care. I know it’s strange to most people. But most people are strange to me. He was a friend of my son’s when they were in high school. Did he tell you that?”

Wallace explained that they hadn’t had much of a conversation.

“They weren’t best friends,” the woman said. “Almost acquaintances, really. Though it doesn’t really matter anymore, does it?”

Wallace agreed that it didn’t. The woman looked at him over the top of her pineapple drink. Wallace told her about the estuary. The woman listened patiently and gulped her drink as he told her about the joint, the run-in with her husband, the foot sweep into the marsh, all of it. When he heard how it sounded he felt the need to tell her more, if only to explain himself a little, to make it all make sense. If people just knew what you were dragging around with you, he thought, they might cut you some slack. But who had time for that? Who could be troubled?

“He really told you he had children over here?” the woman said when Wallace was done. “You’re sure about that?”

Wallace nodded into his glass. The woman pinched her bottom lip.

“That’s new,” she said. “That’s troubling.”

Wallace sipped his drink and felt the acid from the pineapple and liquor burning together in his throat.

“The thing about my husband,” the woman was saying, “is that idleness gets the better of him. He’s not a bad man, but he doesn’t have much to do. Sometimes that leads to trouble.”

“He doesn’t work?” Wallace said, and then wished he hadn’t.

“Oh no,” she said. “Not for years. I have money, you see, and anyway he’s not cut out for most jobs. He’s very sensitive. He’s not a bad man. But he is very, very sensitive. Does that make sense to you?”

Wallace said it did, and the woman smiled in an appreciative sort of way.

“And you,” she said. “Do you work?”

Wallace said that he did, sort of.

“I’m a fighter,” he offered.

“As in professionally?” the woman said.

Wallace nodded and tried to put his face as deep into his drink as it would go. It smelled sweet and sticky and boozy, a vague scent of suntan oil.

“That’s what happened to your face, then,” the woman said, almost to herself. She asked him what it was like, that line of work.

Wallace had to think about it for a second.

“It’s awful,” he said, and then stopped.

That wasn’t what he meant. What he meant was that it was the best thing he’d ever done with his life, the only thing he could do well, and what was awful was how it made everything else seem boring and fake. But there wasn’t any way to explain that, so he didn’t try. Instead he told her not to listen to him, that he was just coming off a bad fight.

“Oh dear,” she said. “And what’s *that* like?”

He told her it was like breaking up. “You tell yourself, never again. But then, what else is there?”

“I understand completely,” the woman said. Wallace decided to believe her. That was a choice

he was making.

When her face changed he followed her gaze back toward the house and saw the man standing on the other side of the screen door, peering out at them. How long had he been there? He had the green jacket slung over one arm. Wallace could see where the dried mud was caked on, just beginning to flake off at the edges. He could see how he must look to the man, drinking pineapple and vodkas with his wife in the afternoon, telling each other about their lives.

The man opened the screen door slowly, two fingers pushing it down the track. The wind shifted. Wallace smelled the ocean. The woman was right. It was delightful. 