



Pain is LOVE

Still dealing with the loss of her only child, Voletta Wallace remains a strong, independent woman who divides her time between being the world's greatest grandmother and the never-ending search for her son's killer.

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Ready To Die was a lie. A big old fat, dooky fib. You've been had. "So forget that album. Don't even believe [it]," says Voletta Wallace, calmly sitting on the far corner of a plush beige sofa. As the mother of a man who made millions making people believe that poverty and neglect were daily dilemmas in his early life, Ms. Wallace has some corrections to offer. ❖ "First of all, I had my son by cesarean section. As a matter of fact, I've never argued with his father. And when he said, 'The landlord used to diss us/No wonder why Christmas missed us,' you need to look at pictures of my son's Christmas. Because my son had the best Christmas. Christmas never missed us." She looks out the window toward the snowy Pocono landscape. A small garden wire juts out of an empty vegetable plot. A few feet away are the leafy lines of a naked cornfield, with straight green tracks climbing a steep hill and disappearing behind it. "I never owed my landlord. I never lived in no one-room shack. 'My mom drives an Ac with minks on her back.' I can't goddamn drive. Which mom is he talking about? Does he have another mother? He certainly wasn't talking about me," she shakes her head emphatically. "My son, I don't know, his mind. Sometimes he just flies off." >>







When Ms. Wallace refers to her son Christopher she often speaks as if he were still alive. As she ever-so-slowly and carefully chooses her words, her constant switch-up of present and past tenses makes you feel like Biggie just might walk into the room at any moment. "God, he's so talented," she says, wide-eyed with amazement. And then she laughs. "I know my son didn't kill anybody. Rap is a story. And it doesn't mean your own. I've heard my son say it. And I've heard other artists say it."

Suddenly the doorbell rings. Ms. Wallace jumps up to answer. Her black velvet dress falls to her ankles, softly flowing from her five-foot-three-inch body. She's been up since 5 a.m. And even though it's mid-afternoon, her makeup still sits unsmudged around her slanted eyes. Not a single gray strand hangs out of place, all conservatively pulled back into a neat, plump bun. "Do you want some chicken soup?" she asks, in a sweet, grandmotherly tone. Ms. Wallace pulls out a bowl for Christopher's eight-year-old daughter T'yanna, whose eight bushy ponytails are accented with cute multicolored barrettes. When T'yanna grabs the bowl of soup, Grandma smiles. "Just seeing CJ's smile and T'yanna's smile when we are together, I forget about Christopher," Ms. Wallace says, sitting back down. "When I spend my weekend with them... I'm so deep in love with my grandchildren. So I think I blocked that tragedy out."

Love makes you overlook some things. The innocent glow that Ms. Wallace gets when she talks about her beloved Christopher is the kind of engulfing, addictive light that no one easily lets go of. Christopher was her pudgy little pookie. He drew colorful portraits in bubble letters and craved her homestyle escovitch fish. He whined about his 8:30 p.m. curfew and cried whenever that pig at his relatives' home in Jamaica came too close to him. This is the Christopher Wallace she knew. Not the train robber or the crack dealer or the womanizing marijuana user you heard on vinyl. Ms. Wallace couldn't see that side. Christopher was her heart. And nothing he said or did could ever put a lock on that.

As the fourth of nine children growing up in the small town of Trelawny, Jamaica, Voletta Wallace was a daddy's girl. She did everything mom and dad said. Kept her room clean. Swept the yard. Even planted flowers in her garden. "I wasn't the problem child," she says. "I had a very happy childhood."

Her mother was a homemaker. But dad's job as a farmer and butcher was more than enough to buy 10 acres of land and build a decent house for the family. "We certainly weren't strugglin'," she giggles. "And we weren't filthy rich. We were rich at heart."

As a young adult, Ms. Wallace visited a friend in the U.S. After six months, she wanted to stay. "At first I never like," she says, turning up her nose. "People were rude. They used profanity as if it was a cup of coffee. But then after a while, I get to like it. It grows on me."

A short year later, she met her baby's father, a welder. George Latore was six feet three inches, 180 pounds and 25 years older than Voletta. "The maturity attracted me to him. The fact that I got a lot of respect from him at the time," she says. "Knowing myself now, I don't ever think I loved him."

Although their relationship only lasted a year, that was plenty of time to make an eight-pound, 22-inch baby. Naming her only child Christopher Latore, Voletta took one look at the little life and knew her world was headed down a different course. "He was so small,

kicking all over the place. I looked at my baby and said, 'This is it. No more babies,'" she whispers. "It wasn't no [labor] pain. It was just that in my heart I can only love one person. I gave my love to this human being. I never wanted another child. Never attempted. Never thought. I was just done. I never married by choice."

Ms. Wallace describes herself as a "selfish" woman. She loves her space. Relishes her freedom. And was always happy raising her son alone. During the day, she worked and studied for her bachelor's degree in education at Brooklyn College. And with all of the money she received from tuition assistance programs, Ms. Wallace financed Christopher's Catholic school education. "Christopher said something to me once. I think it was Father's Day, and [children] were telling things that their fathers did for them. 'You know something, Mom? Everything they say their daddies gave them, you gave me the same thing and more,'" she says, proudly smiling. "He was 10 years old. And I remember asking him, 'Are you sad?' And he said, 'Nope. Because I got more than those ones who have the daddies.'"

Voletta says she and Christopher had the kind of close, loving, mother-and-son relationship that most people only witness on *Nick at Nite*. "We shared. I remember I would be sleeping, and he would come in [and say] 'Are you asleep?' 'No, I'm not.' And he would come into my room, lean at my bed, and we would be there talking sometimes for two hours. He was 18, 19, 20. And he was there," she says. "Whenever he's out, I'm worried. And whenever he's in," she exhales a slow and deep breath, "I can breathe."

But like most teens, Christopher Wallace had another side to his personality. When he wasn't with Mom being the perfect son, chit-chatting and making her laugh, he was out in the streets, cutting school and trying to be the Black Frank White. Ms. Wallace began to see this dark side right before the record deal.

"The hardest time with him was when he used to get himself into trouble. One day I got a call that I needed to come to the hospital right away. When I went, he was wearing a white shirt. And the shirt was red. He said he got into a fight, and someone hit him with a baseball bat in the forehead. Two weeks later, he came home with a big cut in his arm. Evidently, he had [another] fight with the guy that busted his head," she says, getting up to put wood in the fireplace. "I said, 'My God! Is that how you're going to live?' Am I

gonna come home hearing he's dead or something? You know what I did? I went and took out an insurance [policy]. When he was sleeping I said, 'I want you to sign this for me.' When he woke up, I said, 'You know what you signed this morning? I just insured your a-s-s.' He said, 'Why did you do that?' I said, 'Hey, look at that hand.' And when he passed away, that insurance was still strong."

As far as she knows, Christopher was only arrested one time, during a run-in with the authorities in North Carolina.

"Nobody would tell me why he was arrested," she says. "So I bailed him out. He came home and said, 'You shouldn't have bailed me out. I was going to spend the time.' I said, 'For what?' He said, 'I was taking some marijuana down, and the cops saw me and knew a lot of people from New York do this. And I was arrested.'"

Instead of becoming a nagging interrogator, Voletta chose to never ask her son about his other life. The starry image of her plump-lipped pumpkin with the thick glasses would not be tarnished by any allegation. She suspected his shady dealings, but often covered those dark thoughts with the light of love instead. "I trusted

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him. I never thought he was a drug dealer. I know he was doing something illegal," she says, her bright eyes dimming. "After my son's death, I was asking, 'Was Christopher ever locked up? Was he ever in jail nine days?' I'm trying to think, I've never gone two weeks and not seen my son."

But there was that weekend when she kicked him out. Arguing over his rampant truancy, the lifelong schoolteacher gave her son an ultimatum: Go to school or get out. Christopher chose the latter and went to a friend's house. But after talking with his buddy's mom, the painful guilt that only a mother can wield drew some blood. Christopher moped back home two days later. "He told me, 'Ma, you are gonna be angry. Because you know what? I really don't want to go to school.' And he looked me in the eyes, and I really felt sorry for him," she says. "'I want to be a rapper.' I said, 'Can you sing?' And he goes, 'Mom, rappers don't sing. You heard me with my friends in the room, telling me I was making noise. I'm trying to do something. Somebody is going to get me a contract.' Next thing I know he had signed a contract with Uptown. And every month he would get a check. I needed to see the check. It was there. And I started to breathe."

Shortly after the record deal, Ms. Wallace was diagnosed with breast cancer, requiring her to have 20 lymph nodes removed from her breast. All of them were clean, and she never needed chemotherapy. At the time, she knew her son had taken the news hard. But it would be years later when she'd find out that he rapped about it on "Things Done Changed."

"Someone asked, 'Christopher says you have cancer in your breast.' I said, 'When did he say that?' It was on his album. I said, 'That little dog.' I mean, he's just... you know... God!"

She and Biggie rarely spoke about womanly matters. "One day he was outside arguing with a girl. And I heard the girl say, 'No, I will not be your second bitch!' And when he came in, I woke up laughing aloud, 'Christopher, who was that outside saying she doesn't want to be your second bitch? What, she wants to be your fiftieth bitch?'" Ms. Wallace cracks up as she recounts this story. "In those days, every call was a girl. During the contract. Before the contract. Every day he was gonna get married."

Voletta didn't lecture her son on the elements of Mars and Venus. Sure, he had a charming teddy-bear technique that easily wooed the girls back to the crib. But Biggie was a healthy young man. His love of many women didn't disturb Ms. Wallace. Why should it? To her, Christopher was a people person. "I don't know what's a lady's man," she says looking a bit perplexed. "My son loves people. Yes,

he likes pretty girls. He likes ugly girls. He likes people."

Ms. Wallace was formally introduced to only two women in Christopher's entire Don Juan history. Jan, the mother of his first child, T'yanna, and Faith, his wife. "When [Jan] got pregnant, I was too mad. [Also], I was sad because they weren't mature enough for a baby," she says, arms tightly crossed. "I was introduced to Faith after they were married. I had fire coming out of my ears."

Now she laughs. "She was calling the house and I asked her, 'You're calling for Christopher, can't you introduce yourself?' And she said, 'My mom feels the same way. But Christopher told me to stay away from you.' So finally she came down and Christopher said, 'This is my wife, Faith.'" Then Ms. Wallace puffs out her lips, deepens her voice and stiffens up her shoulders to imitate Biggie: "Well, shoot, I know how you feel. I love you both. I didn't want you to say something to hurt her, or else I'm gonna have to take sides. I told her to stay away from you because you kinda angry right now.' And I can understand where he was coming from, too."

Playing the role of disapproving mother would've been easy for Ms. Wallace and hell for Faith. Instead, she tried to accept their relationship. (Faith was unavailable for comment at press time.) But Ms. Wallace is quick to discredit any rumors of discord between her and her son's wife. "Don't believe that. Faith and I have a wonderful relationship in my eyes. She gave me a beautiful grandson," she says. "As a matter of fact, Faith and I were in California [the day after Christopher's death]. Her room was next door. And she came in and said, 'Ms. Wallace, did you know my friend just called me and told me it's in the newspaper that you and I are out here fighting?' And that's the first time since my son's death that I smiled. I really laughed. That's when I lost respect for the newspapers."

The problem that Ms. Wallace did have with her son's marriage was the timing. Two young people traveling the world apart and still building their careers was not a fertile foundation for a healthy union.

"Christopher, you're not ready for marriage," she'd tell her romantic son when he found yet another girl he thought he wanted to marry. But when he actually went through with it and jumped the broom behind her back, she never muttered that phrase to her son again. She just patiently watched, from a distance, the slow unraveling of a loosely tied knot. "They got married. Christopher was East. Faith was West. They never got a chance to really love each other and get to know one another. They never had privacy," she says. "When they were home, all the cronies were there, when they were supposed to be fermenting their marriage. Making it grow. Getting to



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As Big's career grew and his marriage fell apart, Ms. Wallace continued her work as a kindergarten teacher. Not many people on the job knew about Voletta's famous offspring. She was proud of her son, but she didn't need to flaunt his lifestyle to better her own. Voletta never really followed Biggie's career. If Christopher called and said he was on TV, she'd turn it on and watch him stand next to Martin Lawrence. If someone asked if she'd read the article where such-and-such said this-and-that, sometimes she'd buy the magazine. But usually she'd wait for Christopher to report in and give an update.

"He never told me what he was going to do," she says. "His friends from school said they saw an article in the magazine. Somebody was accusing him of something. And when Christopher called, I said 'What is it all about?' And he said, 'Oh, never mind. I'll take care of it.' And I said, 'Oh, by the way, 2Pac called.' 'Really! Oh Mom, could you please get his number? Get his number!' I said, 'Why?' He said, 'For that same article!' But I never gone and read the article to hear what he said."

It wasn't until after her son's death that Ms. Wallace learned of 2Pac's *Vibe* interview wherein he accused Biggie of masterminding the robbery and shooting that befell him at Manhattan's Quad Studios. It was only after Biggie's death that she learned the true extent of the conflict between Bad Boy and Death Row which cast a dark bicoastal shadow over hip-hop. That was when Voletta Wallace finally began to see how notorious B.I.G. actually was. "One day after he passed, I listened to all three [CDs]," she says in a whisper. "I got up off the chair and rested my head, and I remember the one, 'Miss U.' I just kept on putting it on. It was sad. It was good. It was art. And I cried like a baby. Because I was all by myself."

Drenched in sorrow, in one tearful sitting Ms. Wallace pushed off headfirst into the polluted sea of hip-hop. And even with Big's overuse of the word "bitch" and his murky tales of depression and murder, Ms. Wallace's experience was a baptism of sorts. One which cleansed her mind and washed away all of the judgmental misconceptions of the past.

"Before that, all I saw were ugly kids in ugly pants singing ugly music," she says. "If I hadn't done that, I don't think I would've grown. I wouldn't have respected other rappers. I wouldn't have appreciated their work, their guts, their struggles. It takes strength to do that. If you're weak, you can't."

Ms. Wallace never knew how depressed her son was. She still doesn't actually believe that he wanted to die. But she is starting to accept the possibility that her nice little boy wasn't so nice. "Now I should feel angry. And maybe betrayed, but I'm not," she says. "And I don't know if anybody got killed for what he did. I'm not even going to apologize to the people for him. Because he's not here. And if he was, I don't know."

Ms. Wallace continues to push the investigation of her son's murder. Although she won't speak on specifics, she finances a team of lawyers who relentlessly follow new and old leads into Christopher's drive-by slaying and the alleged corruption within the Los Angeles Police Department. As Ms. Wallace continues to seek and accept truths about her son's life and death and the

world in which he chose to earn money, she comes to grips with the endless array of false loyalty that typifies that world. "I am so angry at the so-called friends who are supposed to help to do something to apprehend the killer or killers," she says. "They're sitting down smiling, drinking champagne and [eating] caviar. And yes, life must go on. But if you are my son's friend, call me once in awhile and ask how the investigation is doing."

After Christopher's death, Ms. Wallace's big heart was gone. She dragged herself to work but knew that her false smile and bleeding soul were nothing she wanted her impressionable kindergarten kids to see. So she quit her job and moved to Jersey. Voletta soon found a new passion by opening the Christopher Wallace Memorial Foundation. "Here I am, I just buried my son, and no one was saying anything wonderful about him. I heard what a great artist he was, but before, he was a drug dealer who deserved everything he got," she says. "But I know the generous Christopher Wallace. The gentle man. And what [better] way to extend his beauty and his life than to have a foundation in his name and help other children?"

Founded in 1997, the Christopher Wallace Memorial Foundation (CWMF), is a non-profit that raises money to sponsor youth field trips and donates computers and books to schools across the country. To date, the foundation has raised nearly \$350,000 and given away \$300,000. But like a number of other non-profits, CWMF hasn't escaped scandal. Ms. Wallace claims that past allegations of financial misappropriation were simply lies told by a disgruntled former employee. "He put something out on the Internet saying I received \$280-something thousand," she recounts angrily. "He said, 'Ms. Wallace never wanted anything to do with her son's music, but all of a sudden she's enjoying the wealth of her son.' And he sent that to all of the people I was associated with. So cops are looking for him."

Defensive about anyone questioning how she handles her money, she nods her head and talks in the third person. "Ms. Wallace knows where all her funds are going and have been. The music industry has been very generous over the years. But it's hard for them to give money. Because right now the foundation is being funded by Voletta Wallace."

Ms. Wallace has since moved the foundation out of the negativity and away from its former Manhattan office. She now runs it with one Brooklyn-based employee and handles business out of her five-bedroom home in the Pennsylvania mountains. Here, she feels more comfortable. Downstairs, next to her son's old black couch, you'll find all of Biggie's MTV, *Billboard*, *Soul Train* and ASCAP awards. Upstairs in her bedroom, on a small brown table, she keeps two decorated wooden boxes containing her son's ashes. Happily toiling in her garden, writing poetry and seeing T'yanna (who lives next door) everyday, Ms. Wallace loves her life, and says she'll be content when it ends.

"I'm looking forward to seeing my son again," she says. "He may not be my neighbor. Maybe he's gonna have to start all over again. Maybe paying for the wrongs or rights he's done. But those are the things that keep me going. Knowing that some day, I'll see my son again." ♣

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