



Walter B. Goode

Walter B. Goode, Title Officer. His mother would have loved his new card. Not just because it meant he now had his own office and was considered *Management*, but because, in her honor, he had included his middle initial and perpetuated her little birth certificate joke. *Walter Be Goode.*

If Walter's father had been around he would have insisted on something more serious. But J. Bernard Goode, M.D., had more important things to do than acknowledge paternity. When the nanny for his three children stopped taking the birth control pills he prescribed for her, she didn't stop staying over to entertain him when the good doctor's wife was out of town touring with her latest book. Walter was pretty sure Dr. Goode had planted the seed from which he sprouted while Ursula Goode was out promoting *Planting An Authentic Medieval English Garden.*

When Walter's freshly disemployed mother filled out his birth certificate, she listed his father as *Johnny B. Goode.* Nobody asked any questions.

Walter had nine closings scheduled for the week. The real estate market in Port Hudson was beginning to sizzle, now that the Seattle market was blazing, and buyers and sellers were hooking up like crazed rabbits.

Walter was ready for precisely zero of the closings, the first of which was set for that afternoon. Unfortunately, that morning, as with most mornings, Walter was in high resistance to the actual work required by his new title. He'd started the morning early enough, but that was to allow himself at least two hours of rumination about the meaning of life, in general, and his own life, in particular, while parked in his frayed Volvo in the McDonald's parking lot.

He was always the earliest to arrive at Guaranty Title Company, but that was to allow one or two more uninterrupted hours to work on the website for *LoveChild*, a non-profit Walter had started. It had cost him eight-grand on a credit card to buy the domain name and have a lawyer do the legal part.

So far he was the only member, but he was certain that adding a Facebook page, a Twitter feed, and an Instagram account would start members and money rolling in on an Internet river. So, it was important that his profile pictures and header images, and his bio material, be perfect.

At the moment, Walter was editing his latest blog post, *Loving Without a License*, a piece on the need to hold out forgiveness and mercy, not to mention social services and cash, to unwed kids who found themselves with kids of their own.

In the next moment, Jack Carstens, owner of Guaranty Title Company, was pounding on the vertical glass along the door to Walter's office.

"Your fucking door is locked, Walter," he yelled.

"Sorry, Jack," Walter yelled back, and unlocked the door. He felt more comfortable with the door locked when he was using the company computer to work on his website.

"Walter," Jack said, "I hope to hell you've got the file for the Murchison closing ready. That thing has a couple of real quirks in the chain of title. Nobody bothered to probate Mike Murchison's estate, for example. The underwriters will have to sign a waiver, and we'll need a declaration from each of the heirs, before we can record the docs and issue a title policy. I assume you've got those ducks in a row. Closing is scheduled for four o'clock."

Oh, fuck me, Walter thought. "No problem, Jack," he said. "I'm on it. I'll have the closing docs printed and paper-clipped to the file an hour before show time."

It took six phone calls, and some short fiction, but Walter was able to postpone the closing for a week. It helped that the underwriters had said *No way in hell* until the heirs signed declarations, and it would take days to

make that happen. Walter figured he had a day or two before he even had to think about it again.

The next closing wasn't for two days, so he felt comfortable locking his door and getting back to figuring out how to add a YouTube video to the header on the LoveChild.com landing page.

But now Jack was banging on his door again.

"What the fuck, Walter," he said when Walter let him in. "What's with the locked doors? If you're using my company computer to look for porn you'll be shut out of the system. Try printing documents if *that* happens."

"Absolutely not, Jack," Walter said. "I would never do that."

"Walter," Jack said, "I was just looking at your website ..."

"Jack, I'm sorry," Walter said, "I was just working on it for a minute or so."

"Walter," Jack said, "you've been messing with it for two hours. You must know I can access your files, even your screen. But I'm not here to bust your balls. I like what you're doing with the website. I was adopted out of an orphanage in Romania. Not many people know that. I want to contribute something. You need to put a donation button on your website, but not on my time. Two people just showed up with new Purchase and Sale Agreements and we need to interview them. By 'we' I mean you." He turned and stalked out, slamming the door just a little.

Walter dropped back in his seat. *Wow! He wants to contribute.*

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Two days later he was panicking. He'd spent until ten that morning tweaking the donation button and the Jasper closing was at one. It was now eleven-thirty and he had no documents printed. His phone rang.

"Is this Walter Goode?" a young female voice asked.

"Yes," he said, "how can I help you?"

"My boyfriend is making me get an abortion," the girl said, beginning to cry. "My mom found your website. Can somebody talk to me and my boyfriend? My dad is pissed and says I can't come home until this is taken care of. Can we come talk to you now?"

Walter looked at the clock. Eleven-forty. He needed to change the number on the website to his cellphone instead of his work phone.

"I could do something after work, say five-thirty," he said.

After more tears, and twenty more minutes, he had a meeting set up at the same McDonald's he'd spent two hours parked in front of that morning. Actually, it had been three hours. He had a lot to ruminate about.

It was now twelve-fifteen and Jack was back at his door.

“Walter,” he said, “I need for you to meet with the people at the counter. It shouldn’t take more than ten minutes. I’ll have Marci pull the file for the Jasper closing. You can use the main conference room.”

Except there was no file for the Jasper closing.

This time it took only a couple of phone calls and a story about a computer network problem to postpone the Jasper closing until ten the next morning. That would cut short Walter’s three hours of morning musing and website tinkering, unless he could figure out how to push the closing until afternoon. He picked up the phone, then put it back down again.

At four-thirty Jack came into his office. “Walter, we need to talk. After work let’s walk down to Bullwinkle’s for a beer and a heart-to-heart.”

“Jack, I’m sorry,” Walter said, “but I’m supposed to meet someone right after work.”

“Yeah,” Jack said. “Me. Be ready at five.” This time he slammed the door with emphasis.

Walter found the young woman’s number on Caller ID.

“I can’t believe you’re cancelling on us,” she said, crying again.

“I can’t help it,” he said, “my boss is pissed and I have to meet him after work.”

The girl terminated the call. He tried to call her back, but she didn’t answer.

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“Walter,” Jack said, sliding into the booth at Bullwinkle’s, “you’ve got seven closings left this week. You can’t postpone them all. You’ve got ten more next week. What’s going on?”

I fucking hate this job and I don’t start working on this shit until I don’t have any other choice and I always have a choice: do it tomorrow. That’s what’s going on, he thought.

“I’m just really busy,” he said. “Business is so good I’ve got more jobs stacked up on my desk than I can deal with.”

“Nice try, Walter, but the truth is it’s been slow for June,” Jack said. “Maybe I pushed you along too fast. You’re good with the customers, but you’ve been averaging less than two closings a week. Sometimes the first real work you do in the morning doesn’t happen until after eleven. At least that’s what your computer log shows.”

“That can’t possibly be,” Walter said. “I’m the first one in the office every morning.”

“Well, here’s the deal,” Jack said. “If you don’t catch up by the end of next week I need to put you back in reception where you’re not managing your own time, which you don’t seem able to do. Now, bottoms up and I have to get over to the Mariners’ game.”

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In the dream they’re in a booth at McDonald’s. The girl has her head down on the table. Her skinny body is heaving. Her boyfriend sits next to her, stroking her shoulder. He glares across the table at Walter.

“Why didn’t you show up when you said you would, asshole?” he asks. “We waited a half-hour. I guess all that touchy-feely-I-care-about-you talk was bullshit.”

“I had an emergency,” Walter says. “My boss kept me late.”

“Bullshit,” the boy says, “you just blew us off.”

“I can still help,” Walter says. “I’m sorry you don’t believe me, but I actually came here after my meeting with the boss. I knew you’d probably be gone, but I did show up.”

“You’re a shitty liar, dude. Anyway it’s too late,” the boy says. “Callie got rid of it this afternoon.”

The girl gets up suddenly and comes around behind Walter. She rests her hands on his shoulders. The lights in the restaurant dim, only it isn’t a restaurant now. He is kneeling at an altar and the boy is up on the sanctuary, behind a table, wearing a white robe and vestments. On the table is a large photo of an ultrasound screen. Walter can just make out the fetus.

The boy comes out from behind the table and leans over Walter. He dips his thumb into the silver chalice he is holding and touches Walter’s forehead. The girl hugs Walter’s shoulders, clasping her hands around his chest. He can feel her warm breath on his cheek.

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He sat at his receptionist’s desk. He’d been there, answering phones, opening mail, getting up to find files, since eight o’clock that morning. He barely had time to jog to Starbucks to pick up a *grande* and a cinnamon roll. Between calls he worked on letters his bosses had dictated. He was exultant. He couldn’t stop grinning.

“Hey, Walter, it’s good to see you back where you belong.” It was Alex the Jerkoff, senior title officer. Walter held up his middle finger, the other

fingers curled. He touched his finger to the same spot the boy in the dream touched.

When the Jerkoff moved away, Walter logged onto his website. *The "Donate" button needs to be bigger*, he thought. There was an email notification: *Jack Carstens has donated \$500.00*. Walter emailed a *Thank You*.

Seconds later Jack was leaning over the short wall around Walter's cubicle. Walter could smell alcohol. *It must be true*, he thought. *Jack has a problem*.

"Walter, you fucking moron," Jack said. "Stop using my computer for your personal shit. This is strike two."

"Sorry, Jack," he said "it won't happen again." He couldn't stop grinning.

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