

THE WRITER

By

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OTHER TITLES

Miss Match – 2015

Day 183 – 2015

Grace – 2015

Dragonfly – 2015

Serenity - 2015

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CHAPTER ONE

WALLY

Walter Fleegle woke to the sound of a car alarm. This was not uncommon in his neighborhood. His small third floor efficiency apartment looked out over a parking lot filled with cars, each one with an alarm that seemed to go off randomly. Wally rolled out of bed and pulled up the blinds. In the fourteen years that he had lived there, he had done this a thousand times and only once had he witnessed an actual crime. That time, however, he hadn't seen enough to even be called as a witness. This time, after examining the scene, he deduced that there was a cat burglar in the parking lot. It was a tabby.

Wally dropped the blinds and wondered once again why he even bothered to look. The answer was easy – he had nothing else to do. But he was awake now, and, glancing at the clock, he realized that it was almost time to get up and go to work anyway. It wasn't a great job, but it paid the bills and he was going to earn a decent retirement from it as well. That's the way low level government jobs were: low level, low pay, decent health care and good retirement benefits.

Wally scratched his ass and went into the bathroom for a shower. He hated taking a shower. Not because he hated the shower, but because it meant that he would have to look at himself in the mirror

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again. If he could have figured out a way to shave without using a mirror, he would've.

Walter Fleegle looked at the man in the mirror with a sadness that had become quite familiar to him. At 41, he was well experienced in the art of failure. Perhaps it was his skinny build, or the fact that one of his legs was a half-inch shorter than the other, or that his features didn't quite sit right on his face that predisposed him to his burden of low self-esteem. Walter was short too. He was only a little over 5'5" tall, and that, combined with his skinny build, resulted in what he liked to call his 135 pounds of insignificance. He often wondered if his low self-esteem had led to his failures or if his failures had led to his low self-esteem. He wondered, but he also knew that it didn't really matter. Either way, he would never rise about his appointed station in life.

Like most mornings, Wally had to talk himself through this phase of getting his day started and get dressed. Once he was out of the apartment and on his way to work, things usually got better. His only worry was that one day he just wouldn't bother. Today, however, was not going to be that day. Today he put on his trousers and a flowery Florida shirt and headed to his job. He did take comfort in that shirt. The logo on the pocket gave him security, if not substantive wealth. He mouthed the words and he ran his finger over it. "Florida Department of Transportation: Toll Booth Attendant."

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Wally hadn't always been a toll booth attendant. But he had always been a failure. Walter Fleegle grew up as the odd-looking kid in a small school in a small town in southern Indiana. The other kids teased him mercilessly. Maybe it was there that his self-image problems began. It didn't really matter. For a brief period, he thought he was going to be able to rise above his social and physical limitations. He had been awarded a compassionate scholarship to college where he studied English. He had wanted to be a poet. More than one of his professors had even comforted and encouraged him by saying that his physical condition would serve to enhance his poetry. Poetry, they told him, came best from a wounded soul. After twenty years, he had found the answer to their encouragement. "Bullshit."

Even so, his college years had been his best. Most of the people there tended to be more sensitive to his feelings and if not, they were more adept at hiding the repulsion they felt. In college, being an aspiring poet and being just on the normal side of being deformed, at least Wally had found the pleasure of women. Yes, women. More than one had taken Wally home with her but none had taken him home twice. Maybe, he had thought, that they were experimenting with having intercourse with ugly people in order to see if their other partners seemed better afterward. His mind made up all kinds of reasons for why he got laid the first time and why he never got laid the second time. There was only one time though

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that he was sure. Tiffany had as much as told him that she was offering herself to him out of pity. She was going to be a social worker and she thought everyone needed sex once in a while. He didn't argue. He accepted his pity piece and went home. After college, there were no more relationships, no more women, and no job prospects. English wasn't exactly the kind of degree that guaranteed a six figure income. Hell, it barely got him into five figures.

It was in this state of mind in which Wally rode his Vespa scooter out of the parking lot, down the street, and into the employee parking area of the toll booth where he worked. This was Wally's normal morning routine. He was quite accustomed to it and pangs of regret were both rare and easily put aside. Wally parked his scooter and took his place in the toll booth.

His supervisor had turned out to be a nice guy. At least that part of his life was good. Jack had gone out on his own and found Wally a stool that was a little higher than most of the others. That way Wally could be more comfortable working the register. Jack was a good man. Just after Wally took his seat, Jack came out of the office and over to Wally's booth. At first, Wally thought he must have done something wrong, but Jack surprised him. "Here." Jack said, offering Wally a package. "I won this at the Little League awards dinner." Jack was a coach, of course. "I've got no use for it, but I

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thought you might like it.” Wally took the package and set it aside. He would open it on his break. That’s the kind of man Wally was.

“Thanks, Jack.” Wally said and smiled. “I really appreciate it.”

Then Wally went to work collecting tolls. When he first started as a toll booth attendant, the things he saw had shocked him. After 18 years, however, the sights and sounds of the passing motorists were no longer as stimulating. Still, he could not help but wonder what some people were thinking when they came through a toll booth. These thoughts and memories were triggered on this particular morning by a young mother who drove up while breast feeding. She casually handed Wally a five dollar bill, took the change and asked for a receipt. “You know you can get in trouble for that.” Wally said as he printed the ticket.

“You sexist pervert!” She scolded him. “What I’m doing is perfectly natural! You should be ashamed of yourself!”

“I was referring to the state law that requires that infants under 40 pounds are to be in a car seat.” He said calmly as the infant lost its hold in her nipple and white foamy liquid ran down her breast. “Do you know what would happen if your airbag went off while you were doing that?”

The woman snatched the receipt and drove off without another word. Wally expected a complaint, but it never did come. The incident, though, did remind him of the number of times that a

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woman came through the toll booth in a much too revealing manner. From his vantage point, he could look down the shirt of most women. He tried not to, but sometimes when the blouse was undone by one too many buttons or a bra was missing, it was hard to avert his eyes. The girls in bikinis on their way to or from the beach were hard to ignore too. The ones that really drove him nuts were the girls who never seemed to be able to pull their skirt down past their underwear. On more than one occasion, there had even been the girl without underwear.

These thoughts were still going through his mind when his break time rolled around. Maybe, he thought, that he was actually becoming a pervert. He shouldn't let these memories come to the surface so often and he certainly shouldn't let them stay there. He was even more troubled by the memories of the men who had driven through in an inappropriate condition. There was no telling what they had been up to and he didn't want to speculate. Wally smiled. Speculating on what the woman with no underwear was doing was much more enjoyable. Wally shook his head. It was time to take his break. Maybe the break would break him out of these thoughts too.

Wally took his package and went inside to get a cup of coffee. The small building was big enough for the supervisor's office, a coffee machine, a snack machine and one table. Wally got his coffee and sat down to open his package. He could see Jack watching him

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through his window. Jack knew that Wally would not interrupt his work and open the package early. Wally knew that Jack knew. So why had Jack taken it out to the booth? Wally figured that he was testing him.

Pulling the brown paper off the package, Wally was shocked by what he saw. When he finally got the thing unwrapped, he realized that he had not thanked Jack enough. Jack had won a brand new tablet style computer and had given it to Wally.

Wally looked up to see Jack in his office smiling like the Cheshire Cat. He smiled back, and waved the tablet at Jack indicating that he was very happy to have it. For the next ten minutes, Wally played with it, learning to turn it on, figuring out how to connect to the internet, and finding the programs that he might want to use. It was the word processing program that he settled on as the first one to explore. "Once an English major..." he told himself. "... always and English major."

Jack poked his head out of the office. "I hope you like it!" He said. "And listen! I know that we have times when no one comes through this toll station for up to ten minutes, so you go ahead and take that out there with you. It'll keep you from falling asleep."

Wally did as he was told and took the tablet to the booth. After the morning rush hour, he realized that Jack was right. Powering up the tablet, Wally recorded the incident with the morning breast-feeder.

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He told himself that he was writing it down to protect himself from any complaints. He was unable to think of an excuse for the detailed description of the breasts on the college student in yoga pants who had come through a little bit later.

Later on that night, he decided that he didn't need an excuse for either of them. Somehow, that tablet had reawakened his desire to put his emotions into words. Somehow, that tablet had Walter Fleegle once again looking at the possibility of painting pictures with words. Somehow, Walter Fleegle could be a hero if he lived in the tablet. Walter Fleegle was going to write.

Walter Fleegle, Author.

Walter Fleegle, Poet.

Walter Fleegle, Novelist.

Wally typed the words and erased them. Maybe the first character he should create should be Walter Fleegle's alter ego. He agreed with himself and started to think about what might be a better name to use. Derek. No, he reasoned. That's been done and redone. Wally typed and erased and typed and erased. Finally he settled on a combination of names from his past. Kelly Blanton. That sounded like a writer's name. Kelly was his grandmother's maiden name. Blanton was a distant relative. Blanton Winship, a former governor of Puerto Rico, was somehow related to his father. The Governor had been forcibly removed from office by the

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President of the United States, but that didn't matter to Wally. Kelly Blanton was a much better name to write under than was Walter Fleegle.

Kelly Blanton, Writer. Wally settled on the name. Now he had to build a person to go with it. Once again, he started arguing with himself. Why did he need a new person? Wasn't the new name good enough? No. He told himself that in order to conquer his failures he needed a new self-image. He needed one that would allow him to have the confidence he needed to write and publish his work. Only Kelly could do this. Walter was incapable.

With that argument settled, Wally connected his tablet to the second hand printer he had purchased, and started typing.