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Finding My Table

By Noelle Sterne

At the mall Starbucks for my usual Friday writing session, waiting to give my latté order, by now almost able to reel it off without stumbling, I glanced over to where I always sat. My favorite spot-- no, my spot-- the sole table behind a bearing post at one end of the atrium. The table was always there, waiting for me.

But now I stared, disbelieving. It wasn't there! Panic rose in my throat, but like a soothing aunt I told myself, Someone probably pushed it to one side. It's just hidden behind the post.

Not wanting to lose my place on line, I craned toward the post. No table.

I surveyed the area. Every other table was full. I didn't know whether to curse all the timewasters guzzling their grandes and talking about nothing, or cry. Of course, I could go home, get pulled into client work again, and end the day watching a stupid TV movie and eating too much popcorn to fill the hole of not writing.

But my higher writing self silently shouted, "No!" I'd read The Secret. It hadn't yet lost me ten pounds or delivered three new assignments, but that didn't mean I was giving up on it. So, as the line inched closer to my moment of order and need, with all my caffeine-depleted might, I started to visualize, affirm, imagine, picture, and declare. Between these conjurings, though, a darker vision intruded: I saw myself stranded near the counter, standing foolish and vacant, no place to sit, container burning my palm, the coffee's seductive warmth evanescent before that first blissful sip, and I helpless to stop it.

To counter this evil scene, I projected stronger. Behind my eyes, a wonderfully vacant table emerged, outlined in protective light to keep away lesser-evolved souls. No compromised scene of a seated senior, propped up by his aide and already nodding, released from the assisted-living compound for the afternoon. No sharing with an intimidating young Asian wearing thick black-rimmed glasses and flashing away at his Toshiba laptop. No relegating my clipboard to the only corner of the table not covered by pastel quilted mommy totes spilling assorted bottles, toys, and blankies.

My image suddenly vanished, disrupted by the order-taking young male's monotone from behind the counter. "Your order." The line had moved quickly, and I spoke with deliberate hesitancy, giving the Universe more time to bend the atrium to my affirmation. I succeeded only in annoying the order-taker, whose greatest hedge against boredom was beating the customer's speed in rattling out each drink combination to the order-filler. Wouldn't you know that the order-filler, inexplicably caught up, dispatched my drink

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faster than spritzing circles of crème.

I picked up my container. A nectar that should be savored in solitude I bleakly contemplated gulping balanced on the edge of a giant planter in full view of uncaring shoppers. Almost accepting this fate, total negation of why I was there, I looked around once more. Miracle of Secret-invoked miracles-- in the courtyard center, not one but two tables pushed together shone vacant!

Eyes glued on those tables, claiming them silently, pretending not to rush, I strode over. And I settled in, latté on my right, extra pens on my left, clipboard square in front of me, and favorite pen-of-the-day poised and ready in my hand.

But I couldn't get down to business. I uncovered the container, took a taste, liquid still passably steaming, and tried to relax. I felt in a fishbowl. Not that people were staring at me-- their attention was on each other and their toppings-- but I couldn't shake that public feeling. Toyed again with the idea of going home, but, in addition to overdosing on popcorn, I knew this would lead only to weekend-long depression. I kept sipping and squirming.

A voice above me was speaking. Not God, but a woman with a baby in a stroller, one of those dread quilted totes hanging from a handle. She asked if one of the tables was available. Despite my discomfort, I resented this interruption and determined to get to work. Her presence now made this look impossible. In response to her question, I shrugged, which she took for assent. As soon as I pushed all my supplies onto one table, she murmured a calming word to her baby and dragged the other table six inches away from mine.

Then it hit me. My table could be moved too! I glanced back at the post. Nothing there except a mall janitor, sweeping halfheartedly behind it. But he'd be done in a minute.

I fastened the cover on my latté, positioned it carefully in my tote, tucked my supplies around it, and slung the tote and my handbag over my shoulder. As I got up, a sort of aisle just a little wider than a table width revealed itself (Universe at work?). Laden, with difficulty I began pulling the table, backwards, through this demi-aisle toward my post.

The table made a loud scraping noise, and several people looked up from stirring more sugar into already lethal drinks. I pulled on, stopping every few feet to readjust the baggage on my shoulder. No one offered to help, but neither did the mall furniture police appear to apprehend me.

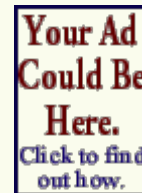
I reached the post, table askew, feeling like I'd made the Promised Land. Settling my purse and tote on the floor, I checked the precious latté. Ah, still upright. Then I repositioned the table carefully-- lovingly-- so it was half hidden but square in front of the post, giving me a view from either side out into the courtyard.

Out of tempting view, I placed my tote under the table, tucked my purse under my arm, went back to the main area, picked up a chair, and carried it over. And quickly got another-- one for me and one for my bags. I arranged the chairs at the table and, finally, sat.

Waves of comfort washed over me. Now I could spread out. Now I could prop my feet on one of the chairs with clipboard in my lap. Now, apart, I could bathe in the privacy I craved in the midst of the mall buzz.



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I loved my private space in this most public place. It reproduced my former writing in coffee shops, as long as I had a corner booth, and parks, as long as I had a sheltered tree, and even subways, as long as I could slide into the lone seat at the end of the car.

Now, in celebration I jumped up and ordered another latté, this time really hot. Back at my table, I reflected on what it took to get here. A principle was at work: I hadn't found the table-- I'd made it. In the fishbowl area, I might have written a little. Succumbing to the defeat of returning home, I might have even written there. But something urged, "Don't settle."

Don't settle for lukewarm coffee, passable writing space. Don't settle for less than you know you deserve. Dragging my table over to the post, with all its attendant trials, gave me the needed reminder to do what nurtured me to work well. In fact, that afternoon was one of the most productive three-hour writing sessions I've had.

So, insist on physical surroundings that please you, places/spaces you've made your own. Insist too on the psychological space you need. That may mean getting out of the house, as it does for me, or ignoring family members and your arsenal of techno-aids that lure and eat time.

See yourself writing in your favorite place. Affirm that you can write with focus and flow, to finished drafts. And of course, take the necessary steps. Maybe you won't need to drag a table across a courtyard or waste a tepid latté.

But you may need to search out neighborhood libraries until you find the right cozy corner. You may need to not so gently announce to quizzical children that you're off limits behind a closed door for two hours. Give yourself the physical, emotional, and mental space to write, and you'll have found-- and made-- your own table.

Noelle Sterne's latest hard-copy magazine piece, on the virtues of not reading while you're writing, appears in March issue of The Writer. Writer, editor, writing coach, and academic consultant, Noelle Sterne holds a Ph.D. from Columbia University in English and Comparative Literature. She has published fiction, essays, poems, and writer's craft articles in many magazines and online resources, including Absolute Write, ByLine, Children's Book Insider, Writer's Digest special issues, Writers' Journal, The Writer, and, most recently, the 2008 Novel and Short Story Writer's Market. Her children's book, Tyrannosaurus Wrecks: A Book of Dinosaur Riddles (HarperCollins) was in print for 18 years and featured in the first dinosaur show of the PBS television children's series "Reading Rainbow." In 2006, a short story won an award and was published in the CrossTIME Anthology, Vol. V. She continues to write and publish motivational and how-to articles for writers, with additional pieces scheduled in national magazines for 2007 and beyond. Current nonfiction projects include a book based on her academic consulting practice, Grad U: How to Survive and Succeed in Graduate School. Get Your Degree, and Ease the Trip for Yourself and Everyone Who Has to Live with You; a book specifically for children's writers, Give Great Children's Presentations; and a collection of essays for all writers, First You Find Your Desk: Start Writing and Keep Writing with Less Agony and More Joy.

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