

Keeping Cool

Amidst a circle of sophisticated wordsmiths

I joined a new writing group. Not that I need another thing to do, but my writing life lacks oomph. One of our area's eminent authors was offering a four-week workshop, so I added it to my to-do list.

My long, overflowing to-do list. I'm already overbooked. I'm backlogged in Wifely duties – cleaning litter boxes, dumping kitchen compost, expressing affection to my Domestic Partner – and can't even enumerate my deep reserves of unopened bills, unfolded laundry and cobwebbed social correspondence.

Yet here was an opportunity to revive my writing stagnation and rededicate myself to my professed life's work. If I'm going to be a writer, I'd better get with it before entropy engulfs me permanently.

The workshop announcement advised bringing a folder, snacks to tide ourselves over for the evening, something to write on, and something to write with. After this last instruction the leader wrote "Duh." Oh, good, a sense of humor.

What, after all, did I know about this person to whom I was entrusting my fragile writing ego and a substantial chunk of my fragile budget? I hoped her little pre-workshop joke was a sign that she'd be gentle with my tender and tenuous literary efforts.

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I tucked my supplies into my Erma Bombeck tote bag, swag from the Writers Workshop in Ohio last spring – my most recent anti-ennui booster. That bag would be my discreet little security blanket, reinforcement that no matter how lapsed my various writing resolutions, I am, in fact, a writer. More a reminder to myself than anyone else, but if anyone did happen to notice, that'd be cool.

Tacked to the instructor's front door was a "Welcome Writers" note, and in smaller font, "Please come in and remove your shoes." I checked my socks – thin but passable. Note to self: Next time wear my new wool Birken-socks. Much cooler.

A big friendly cat met me in the entryway and let me pet him. Flames flickered in the fireplace. A table was laid out with tea fixings and a bowl of popcorn. Cozy. The room had a high ceiling – a converted barn, our host said – and various chairs circling an artsy wool rug. The decor was modern, artistic, Northwest tasteful. A wall of wooden bookshelves evidenced a literary household. Ominous and reassuring at the same time.

I took a seat in a leather easy chair and tried to entice the cat to hop onto my lap. Not interested. The leader called us to order, reviewed the scope of the workshop and her credentials, and passed around packets. I sussed out the group. Not a blip on my gaydar, but you can't always tell at first glance. If my own queerness wasn't obvious yet, there'd soon be no doubt.

The final activity was to read a page of our own writing. I'd brought a polished piece I felt pretty confident about, but the go-round started at the other side of the room, leaving me with five other writers to pretend to listen to while I made little editing marks on my own page, tweaking it closer to perfection.

When my turn came I grew uncharacteristically self-conscious. I had to concentrate to keep my voice from quivering. I noticed my foot twitching and stopped it. Without losing my careful vocal pacing, I forced myself not to fidget with my hair or touch my face or do any of those other little nervous tics that telegraph uncool. I breathed, read, got a few laughs and even some compliments for which, I strived to convey, I was graciously and humbly thankful.

It wasn't until we were gathering our coats and putting on our shoes that I noticed my unzipped fly. Completely gaping open. It had been the whole time. Why wouldn't that damn cat sit on my lap? My God, while I was worrying about my twitching foot – and all eyes were upon me – my poochy belly, covered only by my cotton tighty whiteys, had been utterly exposed. How uncool is that? I could've at least worn boxers.

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