

The Quest for a Desk

By ReadWorks

My cell phone buzzed, and I felt a momentary apprehension. Would this be a good call or a bad call? I looked at the number: “Unknown.” A good sign.

“Hello?”

“Hi, is this Greg? You called about the desk?”

Yes! This was the call that I had been waiting for. I tried to keep the excitement out of my voice, to sound casual. It doesn’t do to sound too eager when you’re dealing with someone from an online classified ad.

“Oh, yes. I was just wondering if the desk you advertised is still available. I might possibly be interested in it.”

“Well, if you can pick it up in the next two hours and pay in cash, it’s all yours. But let me know, because if not, I have others who want it.”

“No, no, I can be there!” I dropped the facade of nonchalance. This desk was too important to trifle with. “Just give me the address, and I’ll be there within an hour.”

That was how I came to be barreling down the Louisiana prairie highway in a borrowed pick-up truck at 7 a.m. on a Sunday morning. For most people, buying used furniture is a hobby. For me, it’s a crucial part of my job.

When audiences watch a movie, they disappear into an alternate world. It’s my job to create that fantasy. What kind of couch would this character sit on? Would they have pictures of their family on the wall to show how they miss their home, or would they have posters of faraway cities that they dream of visiting? These are the questions that I consider on every project. When you watch a video, you may not realize it, but every detail has been agonized over. Every picture frame, every book, has been carefully chosen by someone like me. In this universe, I call the shots. I am a set designer.

The process is the same every time. A director calls and asks if I’m interested in working with him or her on a film. Then the director sends a script for me to read through. I skim the script once and then read more deeply, making notes on how I imagined the settings could reflect the emotions and inner lives of the characters.

A few months ago, Robby, one of my favorite directors, had approached me about filming a biopic. Biopics are films about the lives of real people, though the films often embellish the truth. This biopic was going to be about Flannery O’Connor, one of my favorite authors. Flannery O’Connor’s genius had been a bright flame that was extinguished too soon. She lived much of her life in excruciating pain, as she suffered from lupus. Lupus is an autoimmune disease that causes the body’s immune system to attack healthy cells in the body. In spite of her physical pain, Flannery was wry, sarcastic, and brilliant. She was the perfect subject for a film.

The script specified that many of the scenes of her writing her early work would be shot at a desk. This desk would loom in importance in those early scenes; it would be the key piece anchoring the first half of the film. I had to find the perfect desk.

I searched everywhere for the ideal desk. It had to be appropriate for the time; you couldn't have a sleek, modern piece of furniture in a film set in the 1940s. It had to be the kind of desk Flannery would've owned. It also had to be aesthetically pleasing, something that would look beautiful on film without stealing the show. Finally, after scouring antique sales, furniture stores, and online ads, I'd come across a classified ad online that looked perfect. The desk was in Sarepta, a small town just an hour north of where we were shooting.

I pulled off the highway onto a gravel driveway. Cows were grazing in the fields on either side of the road, and a "No Trespassing" sign hung from one of the gates. After about a mile, I pulled in front of a house. It was a sprawling, plantation-style mansion. Though it had once been the home of someone rich and powerful, you could see that in recent years it had fallen into disrepair. Some of the doors hung off their hinges, and the house's white paint had darkened to a dingy grey. Piles of junk sat on the front porch, and two broken cars were in the yard.

I summoned my courage, went up to the door, and knocked. The door opened just a crack, and a voice called out, "You here about the desk?"

"Yes, sir," I responded. "I'm the one who called about the online ad."

The door opened wider, and a small man glared up at me. He had to be at least seventy, and his shrewd eyes peered at me through large, thick glasses. I saw them linger suspiciously on my piercings and tattoos. I realized I should probably have tried harder to cover them up; after all, I wasn't in Los Angeles anymore.

"What exactly do you want with my desk?" The man spit out the words like an accusation.

"Well, sir, I work in the film industry," I began.

"I don't have any patience for Hollywood. It's all fake," he said. I took a deep breath. This wasn't the most auspicious beginning.

"We're working on a film about a famous author. Many of the scenes will show her writing at a large, wooden desk. I think your desk is absolutely perfect for the film, and I'm happy to pay you a fair price for it," I blurted out quickly.

"Well... which author?" the man asked.

"Flannery O'Connor," I said, tentatively.

The man's face seemed to melt, and the rigid scowl and frown lines relaxed into something closer to a smile.

"Well, why didn't you say so?" he asked. "My favorite author, you know. Kind of like the thought of her sitting and writing all those stories at my desk."