

Free Stuff

I walked toward the river for my afternoon break from the office. It had been snowing in the morning, and the winter wind was cold. When I reached the corner, I saw a woman kneeling in the middle of the street. She was on her cell phone. Next to her lay a big, tall man with black hair, his face flat on the ground.

Another man was standing on the sidewalk, also using his cell phone, and I assumed that both people were calling for help. I paused for several seconds but could not see any reason why I should stay there, so I walked on.

Halfway down that block, I saw a bin piled high with junk. Someone was moving out and leaving all their unwanted stuff on the street. On top of this huge pile were two lightweight, modern, black chairs. I needed a chair in my office. I had recently thrown out my old one. Without a second thought I took one of the chairs off the top of the pile and began carrying it home.

Passing the corner again, I saw that firemen had arrived in their shiny red fire trucks and were bending over the fallen man, who was still face down in the street. The woman was still kneeling next to him, too. Carrying my acquisition, I passed them and went into the pizza place on the corner and ordered a slice of pizza. It was good pizza. Then I carried my chair home, putting it down in front of the computer table where I am writing this now to you. It is a very comfortable chair.

I couldn't have found a better chair. Tenants move in and out of apartments all the time, and they usually leave stuff behind, free to be taken by anyone who wants it. I decided to go out again to stretch my legs in the winter air – and perhaps pick up that other chair. Wouldn't it be nice to own two new chairs for free?

I took a different route this time, approaching the junk bin from the other direction. As I did so, I saw that it was not a pile of junk after all. It was a very large shopping cart with plastic bags tied all around it, like bumpers around the sides of a ship coming into port. Two other carts brimming with stuff were next to it, forming a little island near the curb on this quiet, affluent, residential street in quaint, old Greenwich Village, where the monthly rent on a small one-bedroom apartment was now over \$2,100. Sometimes I think that everybody wants to live here, including homeless people, who we sometimes see sleeping in doorways.

I suddenly knew I was looking at shopping carts containing all the earthly possessions of *three homeless people*. They had left everything they owned on the street and gone off somewhere else, probably because of the freezing cold. The second chair was still on top of the whole mess. I couldn't look at it!

I had just stolen a chair from a homeless man!

Questions:

1. Have you ever done something by accident that was very shocking?
2. Do you think I should have returned the chair to the homeless man?
3. Do you think I should have taken the other "free" chair?
4. Do you think that the chairs were public property, since they were out on the street, and that I should not have felt embarrassed by taking the chair?
5. Do you have homeless people where you live?
6. What do you think or feel when you see homeless people?