

Shipshewana

By: DS Levy

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When Joanie and Hank Culbertson got to the Shipshewana open-air flea market, they split up to cover more ground. The rows of booths stretched far and wide—over 700 vendors, according to the brochure. In the heart of Indiana Amish country, the flea market promised visitors anything and everything, including a daily livestock auction of feeder pigs, dairy cows, lambs, goats, butcher bulls, and horses.

The Culbertsons were new to picking, but they had good eyes for spotting antique bargains amid junk and clutter. In turn, they handsomely resold their treasures at their own booth in the Glennhaven Indoor Antique Mall, making what Hank liked to call, “a small freaking fortune.” They’d done so well, in fact, he’d quit his teaching job at the elementary school.

Joanie spotted the chair and texted Hank to meet her by the Backyard Barnyard, a food court near the main entrance. The scent of barbecued chicken and potatoes wafted in the air. A sign advertised Hoosier tenderloins, cheeseburgers, Sloppy Joes, biscuits and gravy. As Joanie covetously eyed the chair, a small boy in black pants and a dark blue, long-sleeved shirt walked past licking a chocolate ice cream cone.

Joanie couldn’t wait for Hank to see the unusual piece of furniture—the light brown chair, with a tall, straight back, the upholstery inordinately soft. Oddly, a red glove had been stitched into the backrest. On the seat, a small, handwritten table-tent sign warned: “No Sitting!”

When Hank came up, Joanie pointed at the chair. He bent over, examining it carefully, and flipped the price tag over. Not only was it a fair price, but it was a steal.

The proprietor was an old woman with a wart on her chin. Joannie said to her, “This chair, it looks so soft. What’s it made of?”

“Hair,” the old woman said flatly.

Joanie and Hank looked at one another.

Joanie said, “What kind of—”

“Cat,” the old woman said. “Just got it in this morning. A strange relic.”

The Culbertsons inquired about its provenance. The old woman told them a Hungarian man had brought it in. He’d been helping his grandfather clean out his attic—the old man was moving into a nursing home—when they’d found the chair. His grandfather had claimed it was 2,500 years old, woven out of Roman cat hair. The red glove, he’d said, had once held a mummified paw.

The Culbertsons’ eyes glowed, but their poker faces could fool a card shark.

“Another thing,” the old woman said, “The man said anyone who sits on it will die shortly thereafter.”

Well, the Culbertsons figured they’d hit the jackpot. Only a real relic would come with a woo-woo curse invented by a seller motivated to move the merchandise.

“Sold,” they said, not even trying to haggle the old woman down.

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Driving home, they’d had the windows open, but once inside the house, they noticed a mildew and cat piss smell.

“Now what?” Joanie said.

Hank bent over and touched the red glove.

“Wasn’t this on the right side?”

She bent down. “I don’t know. Was it?”

“I could have sworn it was on the right side at the flea market. Now, it’s on the left.”

They stared at the chair.

“Maybe it was on the left,” Joanie said, after a bit.

“Maybe,” said Hank. “Think of all the cat hair it took to make it.”

A cold shiver went down Joanie’s arms. She stepped back.

“We’ll sell it, right?”

“Yeah, sure, of course,” he said. “Think of what it’ll fetch, we’ll be— “

“Rich!” they said together, then fell silent. Who would want a chair like this? It would have to be someone with a strange taste in furniture, or a collector of odd memorabilia. Perhaps a museum—though while authenticating its provenance, a curator might learn it belonged to some poor country whose relics had been plundered in a war and they’d have to give the money back.

Hank said they’d have to sell it as a “collector’s collectible,” an ancient oddity, like the fifteenth century Florentine chastity belt they’d picked up at an old farmer’s barn in northern Indiana.

Still, there was the curse to consider. Maybe, they agreed, the old woman had been toying with them. That, or the guy who’d brought it in had been a bullshitter.

“We’d have to disclose the curse, wouldn’t we?” Joanie said, worried they might get stuck with the strange hair chair.

“I know!” Hank said, after a few seconds. “We’ll build a small gallery out back and charge people to come in and look at it.” His brow furrowed. “But that means we’d have to advertise, run the gallery, take money, and worry about security. Not to mention the money we’d have to shell out to build a building.”

“Or we could just sell it,” Joanie said. “Once we have the cash in hand, we’ll tell the buyer about the curse. They’ll probably just laugh.”

And then they laughed.

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A couple of days went by. The chair held its place in a corner of the room. The Culbertsons noticed the room smelled funkier than before, so they kept the door shut.

But when they had to go into the room, they stood at the doorway, holding their noses until Joanie had an idea: they'd use an oscillating fan. It seemed to help. They dashed in and got what they needed, and on their way out, they both noticed the chair: plain, old, unimpressive.

"You know," Hank said, "that old woman might have sold us a story. It probably doesn't come from Hungary, it probably isn't ancient, and that's probably not cat hair—"

"Oh, I think it is," Joanie interrupted.

"Okay, so it's cat hair," he said. "But maybe someone sewed the red glove on, and there never was a mummified paw. Maybe that whole thing about sitting on it is a big lie."

He leaned down to sit, but Joanie grabbed his arm.

"Hank! Don't even—"

"It's a story," he said. "A made-up fairy tale. That old hag probably has a story for everything she sells to class up her junk. Curse, my ass."

And he sat down.

And Joanie's eyes grew wide.

And the chair didn't break.

And he said it really was soft and comfortable.

And then got up and said, "There, just a chair."

But Joanie worried. For days and weeks afterwards, she studied Hank's every move, his every twitch and eye flutter. Always, though, he was fine.

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Weeks passed, and the chair continued to off-gas in the spare bedroom. By day, Joanie and Hank went thrifting and came home with their trunk loaded. They'd almost gotten used to the chair's stench and stopped using the fan. Now that it was getting warmer, they could open the windows.

One day, Hank suggested they move the chair to their booth. They loaded it into their car and drove it to the antique store, and as Hank started to carry it to their booth, he began to sweat profusely. His face turned pale. He put the chair down and fell into it, whereupon he gasped for breath and died. Incredulous, a sobbing Joanie mumbled, "I knew it, I knew it."

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Now that Hank was gone, Joanie refused to peek in the spare bedroom at all the items they'd collected over the years. Eventually, she gave some of it away and hauled the rest to the curb. She didn't care what it was worth. Yes, Hank would've reminded her of their motto—"Buy low, sell high"—but her heart just wasn't in it.

As for their booth at the indoor antique mall, the hair chair just sat there. No one was interested in buying it, and some people screwed up their faces in disgust. Sometimes, Joanie thought about sitting on it and joining Hank, but ultimately, she was a coward. Instead, she marked its price even lower, hoping never to see it again. When the booth rental was up, she told Jason, the owner, she wasn't coming back. In three months, only a brass trivet had sold. She let Jason have everything, even the hair chair.

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The next morning, Joanie drove back to Shishewana. It was autumn. The trees on the property were red, yellow, orange, and the walkways were decorated with orange pumpkins, gourds, and bales of hay.

At the flea market, she walked along on a mission, and at last found the old booth. A new, younger woman was in charge. Joanie asked her about the old woman, and the younger woman told her that was her mother. Joanie demanded to see her, rather vehemently. The young woman went and knocked on the trailer door behind the booth and soon emerged with her mother.

“I don’t know if you remember me,” Joanie began.

The old woman squinted. “Nope, I don’t.”

“My husband and I bought a chair from you that was made out of cat hair.”

“A chair,” the old woman said, trying to remember.

“It had a red glove? Once it held a mummified paw?”

“Ah, that chair,” the old woman said. “The man who brought it to me mentioned something like that.”

“And you believed him?” Joanie said inquisitively.

“Naw, not really.” The old woman pouted her lips. “People say things all the time in this business.”

“So, the chair didn’t have a curse?” Joanie said, feeling her blood pressure spike.

“Curse?” said the old woman, shaking her head.

“Anyone who sat on it would die shortly thereafter?”

“Oh, that,” the old woman said. “The chair wasn’t cursed. I made that up.”

Joanie wanted to reach out and strangle the old woman or at the very least grab her chin wart. Instead, she turned around and stomped off. Somehow, all she could think about was how Hank had clutched his chest and how the soft hair chair had been there to catch him.