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The Fickle Finger of Free

There's no such thing as a free lunch, or van chairs.

Getting more for less makes the brain feel good in ways no amount of exercise can match. But what happens when less becomes zero? Do the good feelings persist? Or are they reliant upon the transfer of money? Maybe not, but then again...

This story begins in 1979, the year my first vehicle rolled off the Ford Motor Company assembly line. It was a fully equipped Econoline E150 van furnished with wall to wall carpeting, AM/FM stereo, rear bench seat, two barrel chairs, and reclining front bucket seats.

The van vanished in the 1990's, but the bench seat and barrel chairs remain. They've outlasted eleven new vehicles, twenty or so laptop computers, and the combined lives of several cats. For a long while they served proudly in Studio A's control room, which accounts for their unusual odor and unique outlook on life.

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by Matt Manna
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In recent years the chairs have been quartered in the storeroom; a storeroom without any really — room that is. Sadly, the chairs must go. But how? The dumpster seems cruel and an online add more trouble than it's worth. Sound engineer Pete, who confides that he too owned a van in his younger years, suggests the obvious. Stick the chairs on the sidewalk in front of the office and let the fickle finger of fate have its way.

But fate's fickle finger is slow. Twelve noon comes and goes, as does 3:00PM, 6:00PM, and 9:00PM, plus the twelve noon, 3:00PM, 6:00PM, and 9:00PM of two more days. I remain hopeful, but the neighbor two buildings down takes a different view. He marches into the lobby unsmilingly serious and demands, "Do those chairs belong to you?"

"Yes, you want them? They're free!"

"What I want is for them to disappear," the neighbor says. "We have a *very important client* arriving on Friday, and frankly, they make the street look cheap."

"That's no problem. The chairs will be gone by Friday," I tell the neighbor. He says thanks and double-times it back to his place to prepare, I imagine, for *very important client* day.

But his words linger. The chairs *do* look cheap. Fate's fickle finger needs a helping hand. That evening I produce a sign: **Van Chairs • \$80 For The Lot**

The next day, Thursday, (the day before *very important client* day) my intercom rings. The announcement is exciting. A person in the lobby wants to talk about the chairs.

I introduce myself to Burt and let him in on the secret. "Listen Burt, you can have the chairs for free. In fact they've been sitting out there for three days and three nights without anyone, except a persnickety neighbor, asking about them."

Burt is displeased and a little disappointed. He says, “No I can’t do that. Those are great chairs and I have the perfect use for them.”

“Ok Burt,” I say. “If it makes you feel better, hand over 80 bucks and I’ll help you load them up.”

“Well let me ask you a question,” Burt says. “I only have 50 dollars. Will you take 50 for the chairs?”

Now I’m thinking this is a set up. I just told this guy the chairs are his for free and he’s trying to negotiate a price. I don’t say anything though because were inside of 16 hours until *very important client* day.

“Yes Burt, 50 dollars is just fine.”

Burt hands over 50 bucks and takes possession of the most costly “free” van chairs in existence. I stick the bills into the coffee kitty, scratch my head, and try to recall a once familiar verse. Ah yes, “Why try to fight intended circumstance? I’ll bide my time instead. And when it turns its head. I’ll give the finger of fate a good kick up the pants!”

Author’s note: This story is true down to the last detail. A few of the words, including the last four sentences, come from *The Fickle Finger of Fate — Visitor’s Poem*, by Richard John Scarr.

This document available at:

<http://www.mcmanna.com/theficklefingeroffree/>

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