

BARGAIN BOND

There's something dreamlike about finding winter sports gear at a summer garage sale. It's akin to seeing a flash flood in the desert or getting sunburned in February. Seemingly contradictory elements come together and leave the unprepared momentarily dazed. That explains why I paused over a pair of snowshoes on a July morning.

They sat atop their canvas tote, cherry red frame wrapped in licorice black decking. The silver rivets stood out like pearls scattered on black volcanic sand. I lifted them and marveled at how they felt lighter than a pair of hiking boots. Underneath, the aluminum cleat smiled with a fresh edge. No scratches, frays, not even a water stain or smudge of dirt. They were perfect. I frisked them down for a price sticker, but found none.

The seller, a fit gent in shorts and flip-flops, saw me fondling his wares and walked over.

"How much for the snowshoes?" I asked.

"Aw," he answered, rubbing his jaw. "I'll take ten bucks for them."

I froze my poker face securely in place and tired not to fumble my wallet in my haste to pull out the bills. I hadn't priced snowshoes before, but I knew enough to recognize this was a steal. Once he'd taken my money and I had my purchase snugly clutched to my breast, I asked, "So why are you getting rid of them?"

The seller grimaced slightly. "Never got around to using them that much," he said. "I hope you get more use out of them than I did."

"Thanks," I said and turned to go, but not before I saw the seller's mouth curve into a little smile. Now there are as many ways to read a smile as there are ways to describe snow. The seller might have been happy to have ten bucks in his pocket. Perhaps he was satisfied to have cleaned out one more spot in



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his cluttered garage. But I've come to know that his smile was all about relief. He was rid of his cursed snowshoes.

The snowshoes are cursed. Oh, it's not a diabolical curse, the kind that has their wearer become hopelessly lost or uncontrollably goose step into a glacial crevasse. But they are cursed, none the less. I know this because they talk to me.

I first heard my snowshoes about a month after I'd stored them away in my own garage. I was digging around for a screwdriver and unearthed the black tote. It had been covered by empty terracotta pots and was dusted with potting soil. Hey, I heard, you forget about me? I pretended not to hear it and nervously buried it deeper with a coiled extension cord.

Winter came and I got out skiing several times, took the kids sledding, even braved an ice rink, but I never got around to my snowshoes. It was nearing spring by the time I brushed up against that black tote. Remember me? I added another layer of clutter.

Neglected sports gear has a way of dredging up guilt better than a Catholic sermon. That grass-stained childhood baseball sounds like a whining dog longing for a walk. A deflated volleyball resonates with a nagging "what have you done for me lately?" My snowshoes sounded like the lonely uncle I'd stopped sending Christmas cards.

All sports gear is born with a simple singular purpose: to play. If this purpose is left unrealized, they moan to their owners with the ache of broken promises. It makes for one hell of a guilt trip.

Snow came early this year to the high country. I unearthed the black tote, tossed it on the front seat, and drove straight into the mountains. The temperature dropped as I swerved up the switchbacks. I pulled out at an overlook to scout ahead. There, a couple rises due west, I could spy snow-frosted pine. Closer I spotted some patches of thin snow just uphill from where I parked.

I snatched the tote and bolted for the woods. That first-of-the-season snow was whiter than Eric Clapton reggae. I knelt at a wafer-thin patch and pulled out the snowshoes. I settled them on their home turf, their native ground. Not enough depth to exhibit their floating ability, but they looked good. I swore an oath on the spot to give them a good run this winter. Traverses, step-kicks, and trudges. I heard no complaints. The September wind combed through the pines. It sounded a lot like a satisfying sigh of relief.

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