

## Home at the North Pole

by K.C. Shaw

The North Pole had once been an ice skating rink; now it was another tourist trap on the tatty outskirts of Gatlinburg, Tennessee. Its "Meet Santa year 'round!" signs were faded, and the building itself, painted red and green, looked strangely unwelcoming, like a fortune teller's booth at the fair.

Laura parked next to a green sedan, the only car in the lot. She was too early. She made excuses to stay in her car for a few minutes: brushing her hair, touching up her lipstick, double-checking that she had her time card with her.

Another car pulled in beside her and a tall, fat boy got out. He was almost big enough that Laura wondered if this was Santa, but he was far too young--even a fake beard wouldn't make him seem older. She got out of her car and the boy looked at her with relief.

"Are you from Express Personnel too?" Laura asked him.

"Yes," he said. "My name's Kevin. Do we go in the front or what?"

With Kevin following her like a giant puppy, Laura led the way inside. The door was unlocked, its window sprayed with fake frost. Fingerprints had been added by curious or bored patrons. A bell jingled as Laura and Kevin entered.

Laura glanced around, hoping to see something more than the usual gift shop junk. Racks of postcards, fake Christmas trees covered with ornaments, shelves of cheaply made snow globes and Santa figurines--it was depressing. At least the piped-in music was Vivaldi and not Christmas carols.

A short man came into the shop through an open doorway. He was dressed in a green elf costume. Laura wondered if she and Kevin would be expected to wear elf costumes too, and she wondered if the man was technically a midget or a dwarf or if there was actually a difference, and she wondered what the correct, non-insulting term was for someone that short, and she realized, hard on the heels of her other thoughts, that this was probably her boss. She smiled in what she hoped wasn't a patronizing way.

"You're from Express?" the elf said, and Laura and Kevin nodded and introduced themselves. "I'm Rowland Glass. Call me Rowland."

He showed them around, but there wasn't much to see. The shop opened onto the former ice skating rink, which was kept iced over. It smelled stale. "We bring in a crew to melt and clean it twice a year," Rowland said, as though he was used to being asked.

Thick layers of sawdust and velvet-rope barriers marked paths on the ice. Fake holly was wired to the posts. The rest of the rink was a jumble of Christmas trees, giant candy canes, poinsettias heaped up in banks, plastic lawn deer--Laura guessed these were supposed to be reindeer--and occasionally, as they walked the path, something out of place and startling, like a disco ball or a tableau of garden gnomes.

They turned a last corner and reached Santa and his painted plywood sleigh. A giant white Christmas tree had been set too close, so it appeared to be growing inside the sleigh.

Santa himself was slumped on the seat, cheek resting on his fist, apparently asleep. He wore a shabby Santa suit--but it also had a well-made look, as though it and the man who wore it had seen better days. Santa had long yellow-white hair; his white beard, streaked with gray, was obviously real.

Rowland shook the man by the shoulder. "Wake up."

Santa jerked awake and said "Ho ho ho" automatically, with a smile that slipped almost immediately into an uncertain look.

"Laura and Kevin," Rowland said, pointing. "Our new cashiers."

"Oh. Good." Some of the uncertainty disappeared, but Laura thought Santa was the sort of man who always looked a little baffled. She smiled at him, and he smiled back warmly. He didn't look like her grandfather, but his smile was the same; Laura felt her eyes and nose grow hot suddenly, the embarrassing precursor to even more embarrassing tears. She swallowed hard and looked back at Rowland.

They left Santa rubbing his eyes like a sleepy child, and Rowland showed them the exit, double doors with cardboard Christmas elves taped above a "Thank you, come again" sign.

"When we're busy people try and double back to go to the gift shop. They're supposed to go out and around the building." Rowland took them outside into the parking lot, where weeds struggled through cracks in the pavement. The warm October day felt good after The North Pole's ice rink chill. They followed signs that read "Gift Shoppe" to the front entrance again.

"How busy does it get?" Laura asked.

"After Thanksgiving, some days are packed. Especially on weekends. You two can work weekends?"

The temp company lady hadn't mentioned weekend work. Laura nodded and Kevin mumbled, "Yeah."

"Before Thanksgiving we get occasional tourists. Most of them come to laugh. Don't let it bother you." Rowland's face was sulky with frown lines, a lifetime of not letting things bother him.

Browsing the gift shop was free, but tickets to see Santa cost three bucks, a family pass ten. Until Thanksgiving The North Pole only needed one cashier, but after Thanksgiving Laura and Kevin would be working together.

"Is there a photographer?" Laura asked.

"No," Rowland said. "If people want Santa photos they bring their own cameras."

The rest of the day Rowland trained them to use the cash register. It was ancient and complicated; tax had to be rung up by hand. A grimy tax table was taped to the counter. Rowland had a stepstool behind the counter so he could reach the register.

By seven that evening Laura had learned that Kevin was a sophomore architecture major and this was his first job. She'd learned that Rowland invariably called Santa "Santa," but she hadn't quite dared to ask Santa's real name. She'd learned how to twist the break room doorknob just right to open it even though technically it was locked.

Rowland wore a wedding ring. Laura wondered if his wife was his height or what she thought of as *regular tall*, but she never, ever would have asked him.

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Most visitors only went into the gift shop. Laura sold a few ornaments her first week, but no tickets. One young couple looked into the ice rink, said, "Oh, my God," and snickered for ten minutes while they pawed through the shelves. Laura didn't let it bother her, and they bought a snow globe.

Santa took a break every afternoon at five to eat. Otherwise he stayed in the ice rink. "Doesn't he get cold?" Laura asked Rowland.

"He likes the cold," Rowland said.

"It's probably due to living at The North Pole," Laura said, deadpan, and was mortified when Rowland didn't laugh.

Rowland spent most of his time with Santa. Occasionally Laura could hear their voices over Vivaldi, Mozart, or Hayden. She'd decided the music was chosen for its light-hearted, vaguely Christmassy feel, until one afternoon she came in and Rachmaninoff was playing. Rowland was in a bad mood that day.

Rowland ate with Santa ordinarily, but sometimes with Laura on her twenty-minute break. The break room table had a Christmas tablecloth on it, and Rowland brought his supper in a red and green plaid lunchbox. When she left work each evening, Laura felt a little startled that the outside world was still decorated with pumpkins and cartoon turkeys.

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Business began to pick up a little after Halloween. Laura sold a family pass to a couple with two kids, and to her surprise the kids seemed to enjoy themselves. She heard Santa's booming "Ho ho ho!", sounding genuinely jolly, and saw a camera's flash go off several times. The family came back in the front door a few minutes later to visit the gift shop, and Laura heard the woman say quietly to her husband, "It's all tacky and fake, of course, but they do have a great Santa."

The family had just left when the doorbell jingled again. Laura looked up to see a short woman enter--midget or dwarf? And should she be embarrassed to think of the woman seeing Rowland in his elf costume? "Good afternoon," she said, non-patronizing smile in place.

The woman was carrying a red and green plaid lunch box. "Rowland ran off without his supper," she said, her voice practical and pleasant. "I'll pop in and give it to him. Oh--I'm Marie, Rowland's wife."

Laura leaned over the counter to shake Marie's hand, secretly delighted that Rowland was married to a woman his size--but then immediately ashamed of herself. Rowland and Marie were people, not dolls.

The North Pole was closed on Thanksgiving. The next day Laura and Kevin showed up a few minutes before three to find several families already waiting in line for Santa tickets. Laura hadn't seen Kevin since their first day of training, and was startled again by his hugeness. He wasn't so much fat as big, with a hunched look that said "I'm sorry I'm bigger than you" to the whole world.

Kevin sold Santa tickets and Laura cashiered for the gift shop, and the afternoon passed swiftly. They took their breaks separately; Laura bolted her sandwich and chips, aware that slow-moving Kevin was overwhelmed by the unusual level of business. When she returned to work--cutting her break time voluntarily by five minutes--Kevin looked on the verge of tears and the line to buy tickets was backed out into the parking lot.

"I don't have enough quarters," Kevin said helplessly.

Laura sent Kevin on break and bought a roll of quarters from the safe under the counter. Rowland had taught her the combination after her first week; it made Laura feel a tiny bit superior to know that Kevin wasn't afforded the same trust. Or maybe he had forgotten the combination.

It was their first day working till eight. The crowd had thinned out considerably by then, and Laura spent most of the last hour straightening displays of ornaments and sorting postcards of black bears and mountain views into the correct racks. "Have you noticed," she said to Kevin

when the shop was empty, "Santa hasn't taken a break all day? He must have a bladder the size of a milk jug."

Kevin said, "He has his own bathroom and stuff in the back. I think he lives here."

Laura started to laugh but realized Kevin was serious. And she realized also that while she'd seen Rowland arrive in his green car, wearing ordinary clothes--which always startled her somehow--she had never seen Santa arrive or leave, had never seen him not dressed as Santa.

"Maybe he's the real Santa," she said, and she and Kevin grinned at each other, grins touched with uncertainty.

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They were even busier the next day, Saturday. To Laura's surprise, The North Pole was already open when she and Kevin arrived at three. The parking lot was half full. They hurried inside--Kevin kept checking his watch--and found Marie behind the gift shop counter, standing on Rowland's stepstool. She was wearing a red and green party dress and a felt elf cap.

"Are we late?" Laura asked, glad she'd worn a Christmas sweater. She squeezed past a group of people and joined Marie.

"No, no." Marie smiled, showing dimples. "There was a crowd so we opened early. I like to help out in December when I'm not on call."

"Where do you work?"

"St. Mary's. I'm an RN."

Marie had the friendly competence of a good nurse, and kept the line moving briskly. Laura said, "I do medical transcription in the mornings," and they talked for the next half hour, between customers, about the inability of doctors to communicate clearly.

Rowland came to the door and glanced around, scowling. Kevin, standing by the counter handing out Santa tickets when customers paid Marie, towered above everyone else; Rowland said to him, loudly over the noise in the shop, "I need a clean-up in the candy cane forest. And then you can help me with the line."

Kevin handed the roll of tickets back to Marie, and, looking woeful, got the mop and vomit cleaner out of the break room. Laura watched him lumber into the ice rink and was glad she was working the register.

The crowd thinned out finally. "Whew," Marie said. "A shipment of new ornaments came in this morning, but I haven't had time to unpack them. We'd better get them on the shelves now."

The boxes were in the break room; Laura brought them out and set them behind the counter. "I ordered these," Marie said. "Aren't they nice? I got a box for our tree at home too."

The ornaments were delicate blown glass painted with snowflakes. Marie priced them and Laura hung them on the Christmas trees that were starting to look bare of ornaments. "I wondered how you stayed in business, until today," Laura said. "Is it like this until Christmas?"

"Yes; we make most of our money this month. There's not much of a profit, really. It's mostly just a hobby for Rowland, and a job for Chris."

"Chris?"

"Santa." Marie smiled, and turned to greet a group of customers crowding through the door.

Laura hung the last ornament, amazed that she had worked at The North Pole six weeks without learning Santa's name. She leaned down to Marie and whispered, "Please tell me Chris's

last name isn't Kringle."

Marie gave a whoop of laughter, and immediately clapped her hand over her mouth as the customers all stared at her. "It's Bryson, actually," she whispered back.

Laura was used to leaving as soon as the register was counted down and the shop straightened, but as Rowland shooed the last customers out at eight and turned the sign to "closed," Marie said, "Why don't we order pizza? Can you and Kevin stay?"

Laura had nothing to do at home except laundry. "Sure," she said, and Kevin nodded.

Marie called, not the closest place--a chain store with five-dollar pizzas and sauce that tasted like ketchup--but Big Mama's, where all the locals ate to get away from the tourists. Big Mama's didn't deliver, so Rowland changed into slacks and a sweater in the bathroom and drove out to get the pizzas.

He brought back three larges. Laura eyed Kevin's bulk and hoped that was enough. They crowded around the table in the break room, even Santa, who had taken off his Santa hat but looked, oddly, more like Santa than ever without it.

Laura wanted to ask him if he really lived at The North Pole, but it seemed both insensitive and jokey. She studied him instead from under her eyelashes as she ate. He gave the impression of being a big man, but really he wasn't a bit fat and not all that tall. Or maybe he just seemed normal-sized next to Kevin, who was packing away pizza as though he hadn't eaten all day.

Marie said, "Kevin, stop slouching like that. It drives me crazy."

Kevin gave her a frozen-startled look over a piece of pizza. He unslouched fractionally.

"All the way, come on," Marie said, smiling. "You'll hurt your back."

Kevin straightened up, but his slumped shoulders and clamped-in elbows still made him look hunched. Marie sighed.

Santa, patting delicately at his beard with a napkin, asked Kevin the one question Laura would have never dared ask in the same room with Rowland and Marie. "How tall are you?"

"Six seven," Kevin mumbled.

Santa smiled, her grandfather's smile that made Laura want to hug him around the middle, and maybe stand on his feet while he walked her across the room. "You ought to play basketball," he said.

Kevin frowned, his face bunching up in anger. "That's what everyone always says," he said, his voice suddenly loud. "I hate it! I hate sports! You have no idea--"

He broke off, the frown turning to a look of horror. He crammed the rest of the piece of pizza in his mouth and chewed furiously, staring at the far wall.

Santa looked baffled and hurt. His hands shook a little, Laura noticed. He was older than she'd thought.

Rowland said into the silence, "Of course I understand. People tell me I should go out for basketball all the time."

"*Rowland*," Marie said, giving Laura a "what will we do with him?" shake of the head. Rowland grinned, relaxed in a way Laura only saw when Marie was around.

"So what classes are you taking next semester?" Laura asked, and Kevin looked relieved.

He swallowed hugely and said, "Calculus, Physics, Methods and Materials, Theory, and Design Studio. Studio's every semester. It's great."

"Good grief," Rowland said. "Rocket science?"

"Architecture," Kevin said humbly.

"That's great." Rowland grinned and glanced at Marie, who was already giving him a

warning look. "You can set the roofs on yourself. Like the star on a Christmas tree."

"Rowland!" Marie said again, more sharply.

Kevin gave Rowland a slow smile. "Nah, the engineers do that. I just make sure they set it on straight."

Rowland laughed and Laura felt the tension in the room ease. She glanced at Santa, who was smiling again although it was clear he wasn't sure what they were talking about.

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Laura wanted to ask Marie about Santa, but she had no chance until the following Saturday, when Marie worked with them again. She showed up at four still wearing her nurse's uniform.

"Has it been busy?" she asked, although Laura figured one glance at the packed gift shop would answer her question.

"Not quite as bad as last week."

Marie changed in the break room and joined Laura at the register. "Where's Kevin?"

"Helping Rowland. It's a madhouse of kids in there. And Kevin's not the fastest cashier I've ever seen," Laura said--charitably, she thought.

"Slow moving, not slow thinking." Marie climbed onto the step stool and set the elf cap on her dark hair, skewering it in place with bobby pins. "Rowland's idea, not mine," she added, catching Laura's doubtful glance. She smiled. "Trust Rowland to stick with what he knows. But I won't wear the whole outfit, just the cap."

There was a line, and for a little while Laura and Marie were both too busy to talk. The new ornaments and knick-knacks Rowland had finished pricing just as they opened were selling fast, and the nice glass ornaments from last Saturday had sold out already. "I should've ordered more of those," Marie said when Laura told her.

Finally they had a moment's respite. Marie bought some pennies from the safe and Laura picked up the bags she'd knocked to the floor earlier and hadn't had time to retrieve. "Does Santa--does he live here?" she asked, as casually as she could.

Marie sighed. "Yes. Temporarily, supposedly, but he's been here a good three years. We remodeled the old offices in the back into an apartment. But please don't tell anyone."

"Of course not," Laura said. "Er--why? Why here, I mean?"

"Well, he doesn't drive. And he likes it here. He loves that Santa suit, the poor dear. He has two of them, actually; he wears one while the other's being cleaned." Marie cracked the penny roll open on the edge of the counter.

The line formed again, and as she waited on customers Laura wondered how she'd get the conversation back to Santa later. But during the next lull Marie said, "He used to live in those apartments on East Rutledge, but Rowland got sick of picking him up and dropping him off every day."

"Where'd you find him?" Laura asked. "How do you find the perfect Santa in Gatlinburg?"

Marie smiled. "By accident." She paused to ring up an order for a customer, then went on, "He showed up in the ER one night when I was on shift there. I was floating departments then. Someone had mugged him and beaten him up." She shrugged a little, her smile gone. "It turned out he was homeless. I talked it over with Rowland and we decided to do something to help him."

"So you bought an *ice rink*?" Laura asked.

"Well--yes. Not just like that, of course. This was Rowland's idea. I thought we'd maybe help Chris get a little job and an apartment and one of us could check up on him every day, but Rowland's so into the whole elf thing." She laughed, a laugh tinged with exasperation. "And Chris is a great Santa."

They grew too busy for conversation again, but Laura was satisfied. And disappointed, she had to admit--but not really surprised.

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The days flew by, Laura's mornings taken up with transcription typing, her afternoons and evenings at The North Pole. Somehow she found time for her own Christmas shopping. She got all her friends "Greetings from the North Pole" snow globes from the gift shop, and bought one for herself too.

The Saturday before Christmas was busier than ever. The gift shop was so packed Laura wondered about fire code violations, and Santa's booming "Ho ho ho!" was starting to grate on her nerves. It was Vivaldi every day now too. "Can't he at least change CDs?" Laura complained to Kevin, who was helping her cashier. Marie was at her real job, and Laura and Rowland both were in a bad mood.

Kevin surprised her by saying, "Don't complain. He might switch it to Rachmaninoff again."

Rowland's bad mood seemed to be caused not so much by Marie's being gone, but by the haircut she'd given him. He stomped into the gift shop an hour after they opened, looking for Kevin to help with the line--which meant stopping kids from running out onto the ice. He kept tugging at the hair above his ears as though he could pull it longer.

"I like your haircut," Laura said.

"It's too short," Rowland muttered, and Laura very carefully didn't look at Kevin, afraid they'd exchange ironic glances.

Kevin was really more of a hindrance than a help at cashiering, and Laura was relieved when he was gone. She liked the challenge of ringing up customers, giving out Santa tickets or wrapping ornaments in tissue paper, and answering stupid questions as fast as possible without seeming rushed. If Marie could do it, she could too.

Business started to drop off around seven and Kevin came back to help Laura straighten up and do some restocking. The break room was stacked with boxes of ornaments ready to be priced, and emptied boxes not yet broken down.

While they worked Kevin said in a low voice, "Do people ever have pointy ears?"

"What?" Laura asked. She was wrestling with the pricing gun and thought she might have misheard him, or missed some vital part of his sentence--such as "stop me if you've heard this one."

"Pointy ears." Kevin pinched the tops of his own ears, looking so solemn that Laura laughed.

"You mean like Spock or Orlando Bloom? I don't think so."

Kevin lowered his voice again. "Rowland has pointy ears. Could it be, you know, something to do with his--condition?"

"Rowland's pregnant?"

Kevin blushed deep red and Laura, grinning, went back to pricing ornaments.

But later she remembered Marie saying that Rowland was *into the whole elf thing*. Did he wear fake pointy ears along with his elf costume? It didn't seem his style, somehow. And he was trying to hide his ears.

When Rowland joined them at eight to take the bank, Laura looked closely at his ears when his back was turned. Like Marie's, his hair was dark and slightly curly, and although it was trimmed shorter than before it still curled over the tops of his ears. But not enough to hide them entirely. They did draw up to actual points. Not like Spock's ears or fake Halloween ears. Just--pointed ears.

Laura drove home through dark streets decorated with white-light snowflakes, thinking about elves.

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The North Pole was closed on Christmas Eve and Christmas--which made sense to Laura, who wouldn't have been at all surprised, when she pulled into the parking lot on December 23, to see a sleigh and eight reindeer park next to her. But the only difference was the music. Vivaldi had given way at last to Christmas carols.

It had turned cold out too, and the last-minute shoppers and Santa visitors wore heavy coats over Christmas sweaters. They all commented on the weather when they came in. Laura answered automatically: "Is it snowing yet? They said we might get a few inches tonight," but when it did finally begin to snow the shop was empty and only a few families were still wandering around the ice rink paths.

It was past five then and already growing dark. Marie and Laura rushed to the door and stared out at the snow. "It's just a flurry," Laura said. "I bet it'll stop by the time we close." The North Pole was closing at six.

"No, we'll have a white Christmas for sure." Marie giggled. "I'll go tell Rowland. He'll be thrilled."

Laura watched her hurry into the ice rink and smiled. Marie was in a holiday mood, chattering about Christmas plans. She had told Laura that they always invited Santa to stay with them over Christmas. "It's like old times," she'd said, and Laura hadn't needed to ask what she meant. "Except relaxed, of course--no rushing around with last-minute checklists."

"That's the way to celebrate Christmas," Laura had said. "No stress." Now that she knew to look, she'd seen that Marie had the same pointed ears as Rowland, hidden under her hair.

Marie returned now, followed by Kevin, and they went outside to look at the snow. Laura joined them, hugging herself and shivering. "Look at it coming down!"

"It's starting to stick to the grass," Kevin said. His breath clouded in the bitter air.

They went back in, grinning. Marie said, "We can close as soon as those two families leave. I want to get home before the roads get bad."

One of the families came back into the shop a few minutes later and browsed the shelves, but they didn't stay long. Marie counted the register down, singing along with "Holly Jolly Christmas," and Laura joined in while she straightened the shelves for the last time.

A few minutes later Rowland came in, and Marie stopped singing to say, "Is it cleared out? Go get changed, then, so we can leave. Where's Chris?"

"He's changing now." Rowland disappeared into the break room.

Marie looked after him, smiling. "I'm glad we went through with his idea," she said to Laura, gesturing to show she meant The North Pole. "He didn't really want to retire, but I talked

him into it. This place gives him something to do while I'm at work."

Rowland came out again, dressed in slacks and a sweater, and Kevin and Laura brought him their final time cards to sign. "It's been a real pleasure getting to know both of you," he said, a little gruffly. "If you're available next year, we'd love to have you back."

"I'd like that," Laura said, and realized she meant it.

Kevin left first, while Laura was still gathering her coat and purse. She went to the door with him and waved, and he stepped outside with a look of awe, as though he'd never seen snow before. Laura laughed, and Marie called, "Straighten *up!*", her voice high and pure on the cold air.

Kevin half-turned and gave her his slow smile, then unslouched. As he strode to his car he put his shoulders back properly and lifted his head, and suddenly he was no longer a shambling fat boy but a dignified, imposing young man on his way to something important.

They cheered and clapped, and Kevin folded himself into his car with a grin Laura could still see even as he drove away.

Marie sighed, smiling. "I hope he keeps that up. Chris, you missed saying goodbye to Kevin."

Laura turned and blinked at the sight of Santa wearing regular clothes--jeans and an oversized sweater with a knitted picture of Rudolph on the front. "You can still say goodbye to me," she said. She hugged him, and he smelled like her grandfather--of soap and clothes that had hung in a closet for too long. She had never said goodbye to her grandfather before he died. "Goodbye," she whispered now, squeezing her eyes tightly shut. "I'll miss you."

He looked both surprised and pleased. "Oh, I'll miss you too. Will you be back next year?"

"I hope so." Laura straightened up and looked at Rowland. "You have my number, don't you? Call me if you ever need an extra cashier."

Rowland nodded, and Laura put her coat on and picked up her purse and car keys.

"Merry Christmas!"

"Merry Christmas!"

The snow was even heavier now, and Laura twirled a few times as she walked to her car. She heard Santa, Rowland, and Marie laugh.

She looked back and waved one last time before she pulled onto the street. Rowland and Marie stood side by side in the doorway, holding hands now, with Santa behind them waving.

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