

The Exiled Elf

by H. W. Moss

Michael was working the customer service desk when the angry couple approached and began their tirade.

“We want to return this, it’s not what it claimed to be, it’s an imitation, a cheap fake.”

The woman pulled a receipt from her purse, flattened it out on the counter with both hands. The man opened a paper bag in front of Michael and poured out the contents. A set of steak knives bound together by a single thick blue rubber band, the kind a bunch of broccoli has wrapped around its stalks, fell onto the glass counter top.

Michael stared blankly at the couple. “That’s a set of steak knives. How can they be fake?”

The man was indignant in his response. “They were not made in Solengen, Germany. Instead of being chrome-plated steel, they’re just plain old stainless steel. See here, it’s inscribed on the side of the blade.”

Michael read the words as instructed. He did not question the couple, instead said, “This is a thrift store, not a downtown mall store. We don’t claim to have any brand names and, besides, all sales are final.”

The man raised his head like a rooster about to strut in order to emphasize the depths of his self righteousness. “We paid for Solengen, we did not get Solengen, therefore we want our money back.”

In retail, discretion is usually the better part of valor even if the customer is dead wrong. On the one hand, Michael was about to emphasize the store’s no-return policy,

and on the other was considering making an exception because of their strident tone, when a voice behind him said, "It's all my fault. I'm responsible."

It was LeRoy, the new sales person, taking credit for the error. "I mislabeled them the other day. Sorry. I was just trying to be funny."

With hard evidence in the form of a confession, Michael had little choice but to comply with the customers' demand even if it was against store policy. He looked at the receipt, opened the cash register and handed the couple four dollars and 45 cents. For six steak knives, that was a deal by any stretch, Michael thought as he counted out the paper and the coins.

The couple accepted the money with a haughty attitude, turned on their heels and departed.

"We have to talk, LeRoy," Michael said sternly. "This isn't the first time we've had product placing issues that have been traced to you."

The man stood less than five feet tall, but his embarrassment was large. LeRoy's entire face from where the tops of his ears disappeared into a blue Navy style knitted cotton watch cap down to the opening of his shirt front, all the visible skin including his entire face, turned a brilliant beet red. It was as if he had been painted. Or, Michael considered, it was as if LeRoy's heart suddenly beat so fast and so hard all the blood in his body rushed to that one area under his skin.

"Yes, well, you see . . ." LeRoy began lamely. "I thought I was doing something special for those people, you know, when they were in here the other day looking at cooking utensils and plates and such."

Michael hoped his scrutiny of the smaller man would not be interpreted as condescension. He folded his arms across his chest the better to emphasize his displeasure and said, “Yes, go on.” As assistant manager it fell to Michael to head off problems before they were brought to the attention of Miss Gideon who reacted so dramatically to every minor incident, it might as well be the sinking of the Titanic.

“Well, so, I labeled the steak knives. It’s what I do, you know. Label things.”

“Listen to me, LeRoy. You put price tags on things. You don’t label the objects we sell, you price them. And you price them according to our price list which, I see, you do not seem to have with you right this very moment. Do you?”

As if by magic, in a manner which caused Michael to blink twice because he thought he was imagining things, the well worn clip board which described generic items from sheets and bedding to books and sets of shelves, appeared in LeRoy’s right hand. A sheepish grin, which Michael interpreted as “gotcha,” crossed LeRoy’s face.

Michael back pedaled. “Okay, my mistake. You have the pricing guide. What I don’t understand is what prompts you to put a name on the tag in addition to the price.” Then he began to list things which had turned up in the store. He ticked off a finger with each item: “There was a small silver pill box you marked ‘999 Fine’ which was nothing more than nickel covered plate. The crystal ashtray that said Waterford on the bottom was nothing of the kind. But my personal favorite was a comic book called “Haight Street Stories” which you misidentified as being from The Black Sun Press, Rue Cardinale, Paris. Yet nothing was priced like Champagne, it was all fifty cents and a dollar. The price guide specifically says that if you find collectibles or valuables, you are to bring

them to the manager or assistant manager for premium care and pricing. So what do you have to say for yourself in these instances, hmmm?”

LeRoy’s features were composed and assured and his skin color returned to normal when he replied: “I told you, that’s what I do.” When Michael looked askance at this statement, LeRoy added, “I label things. That’s my job.”

“Your job here? That’s not your job description here in the thrift store.”

“No, not here. At the North Pole.”

Michael said nothing in reply to this fantastic statement. Obviously, LeRoy was off kilter, probably a psychotic to boot, working in a thrift store because that’s the only place that would have him.

“That’s what I did for Santa,” LeRoy continued. “I labeled things before they went out so that they turned into what the gift was supposed to be. If I took any old car and named it Lamborghini or Rolls Royce, that’s what it became. If I put Tiffany on a lamp, that’s what it was, a Tiffany lamp.” His voice tapered off as he became introspective, as if considering what he said as he said it. “The ashtray should have been Waterford crystal, but it doesn’t seem to work here.” He brightened noticeably as that thought passed and he looked up at Michael. “Y’see, I was trying to make the comic book valuable, but it backfired. I know, I know, I’m here supposed to be doing penance, but it seems to me that labeling ought to work anyway.”

The man sounded incredibly sincere in his belief he had some sort of mystical power. He never seemed to realize his was a preposterous tale. Yet Michael could not help but be drawn into this mad conversation. He said, “Penance? What do you mean by that?”

“They took away my naming ability and forced me to come down here and work a corner thrift store until they think the punishment is sufficient.”

“Who they?” Michael had the temerity to ask despite the absurdity of the man’s claims.

“Why, Mister and Missus Claus, of course. Santa was my boss. I really doted on the old man, but he demoted me after I played a name switch on him. I thought he would appreciate it, but nope.”

“And what, exactly, did you do that he frowned upon?”

LeRoy looked truly repentant when he replied. “I turned his sleigh into an SUV. Got out a sticker, wrote the make and model on it, slapped it on the side. I thought he could use an all weather all terrain vehicle instead of that open air contraption pulled by nine reindeer if you count Rudolph.”

Michael had become fascinated. There seemed no end to the small man’s ability to spin a yarn, to milk the tale without exactly taking responsibility for his actions. What was most remarkable, LeRoy really seemed to believe his own story. And he had cooked up a good one. Michael had heard some great excuses in his time, but nothing like this.

Just then the PA system crackled to life and a voice said, “Attention shoppers. The store will be closing in ten minutes. Please take your purchases to the cash register now.”

Michael looked at his watch. Almost closing time.

LeRoy was not about to be put off by a simple ploy like telling him it was time to knock off work for the day. He continued unabated: “You think we make everything in the North Pole that gets delivered under a tree come Christmas morn? I mean, we’re Elves, for god’s sake, not factory workers. We don’t make refrigerators at the North Pole;

that would just be silly. My job is, er, was, to turn ordinary items, let's take an ice cube tray, for example, and make it over into an entire twin door side-by-side freezer with a 32 cubic foot fridge and brand name counting for everything."

"Are you insane?" Michael finally said with exasperation after hearing this last. "Do you expect me to believe such a cock and bull story that you're an exiled elf who's been dumped in San Francisco and sentenced to work here? Hunh? You think I'm crazy too, is that it?"

"Well, it wasn't exactly a sentence handed down by a judge. I mean, yah, sure I was guilty of interfering with the products, but I did it to make people happy. Can I help it if sometimes the label falls off or the boss doesn't like my work?"

Michael realized an audience of customers had accumulated. He said, "End of discussion. That's it for now. We can talk about it after work over a beer if you wish."

The little man did not utter another word. Twenty minutes later while standing outside next to Michael as he chained the front door shut, LeRoy said, "Let me buy you that beer, okay? Let's go to the Trophy Room and we can continue our talk."

Michael was pleased there seemed to be no animosity. "Fine," he said, "a beer sounds good. And you owe me. I saved your ass today. Gideon would have fired you on the spot if she found out what you've been doing with the merchandise."

AJ put two full pints of dark ale on the counter. LeRoy paid and they walked to the back pool table area where a small round table sat isolated. After his first sip, Michael said, "Aren't you supposed to have pointed ears? If you're an elf, where are your pointy ears?"

LeRoy put his drink down and sat staring at Michael as if astounded by what he had just heard. "I can't believe you said that." Then, faster than lightening, LeRoy swept a hand over his head and removed his watch cap. The ears sprang up and forward. They were twice the height of a normal human's and definitely had sharp angles at the top.

"How's that for pointy? Top of the pinna, above the helix, looks like a couple of spikes, don't you agree?"

Michael sat with wide eyes, took a sip of his beer and said calmly, "Now I see why you wear that cap all the time. But that doesn't make you an elf as far as I'm concerned. Besides, if you really were from the North Pole, someone could expose you, couldn't they?"

LeRoy smiled at the thought. "You think somehow you could draw attention to an elf? A mere elf? In the scheme of things, how do you think it would sound if you said to -- I don't care if it's the FBI or the local television news -- 'Hi. I want you to investigate this elf I was talking to the other day.' I don't think so, Michael."

There was a moment of silence during which Michael considered what he had been told and what he had seen. He was still skeptical and said as much.

LeRoy said, "Want to see me wriggle them?" The ears did not simply move back and forth, they flapped like bird wings.

Michael watched the demonstration with genuine amusement. "Amazing," he said as he pulled down half his beer in one gulp.

"I always wanted to be an elf," LeRoy continued with a self-satisfied air. "And in life, you are what you try to become."

“Say again?” Michael sat opposite grinning. He rolled the base of his beer glass in wet circles on the table top. There were few patrons and the background noise that usually floated around inside the bar was low enough to allow normal conversation. The bartender would not turn the music up loud for another hour.

“Well, if you want to be a doctor, you have to try and be a doctor,” LeRoy explained. He lifted his pint, peered through the dark liquid before he took another sip. His face displayed a resigned expression as if he was disappointed by the flavor. “Nowhere near the kick Howee has, but one must make allowances.”

He set the glass down and folded his hands. The digits were small, stubby and round rather like sausages, Michael thought.

“As I was saying, you could follow the regime described by adult authorities to become a physician, the American Medical Association for example. Or you could follow your own path, but ultimately it is a matter of whether or not you become that to which you aspire. Just as every journey begins with the first step, whatever you become requires a conscious first step. You could get it wrong, of course, and you can easily be led astray. Economic considerations frequently sidetrack the best of plans. In that case, one starves, changes direction or finds alternative food sources while staying on the path. In my case, I wanted to be an elf, plain and simple. From the time I first heard about Santa’s Helpers, I wanted to become a subordinate clause. Ha, ha. Little joke. Truly, I wanted to become an elf when I was still a child.”

“Where were you born?” Michael asked. He had no idea what he would hear in response, but the answer was astounding.

“In a tiny Bavarian village called Wallgau shortly after Martin Luther posted his 95 Theses on the door in Wittenburg. It was early in November, 1517, and I remember distinctly it stopped snowing just as I entered the world.”

“LeRoy, you trying to tell me you remember the weather on the day you were born?”

“Every elf does. That’s how we know we’re elves. And my name isn’t really LeRoy. I was born Baptistin Kraft. When I was sent here I didn’t want to be known as Boris or Benny or anything that smacks of mispronunciation of my name. So I chose LeRoy.”

“Can I still call you LeRoy?”

“Of course.”

”Well, LeRoy, I’m beginning to warm to your story. It’s fabulous, but rather well constructed. You must have thought about it a lot.” The little man had a piercing stare, but Michael was quite used to contests of this sort and stared back. When he broke into a grin, LeRoy followed suit. “You have to admit, it sounds crazy. You say you’re what, four hundred years old?”

“Something like that. You lose count after a while.”

“I imagine.”

“Seriously. And, yah, I know you won’t believe me, but I just need to get it off my chest is all. I mean, there was a time I could change a Ferrari into a Ford, and vice versa, simply by replacing the insignia. As they say, power abuses and absolute power abuses absolutely.”

“How long did you work for Santa? Is that what you call him, Santa?”

“That or Mister Claus. I got the job when I was 25, I guess that was in 1542. But I didn’t get to tag things for a century more. I mean, I had to pay my dues before I got my real job, putting tags on gifts. Every gift has to have a tag to identify it. If you give a chess set, it has to be a real chess set and has to say so somewhere on the box or on the gift itself. When I put a tag on something that said ‘chess set,’ it became that which I named it, a real chess set. I could make a hen’s egg into a Faberge. The tag makes all the difference in the world. It makes whatever you want into the real thing.”

“So when you changed his sleigh, he took offense? That’s kind of short sighted of him, wouldn’t you say?”

LeRoy drained his glass, waved it in the air and said, “I’ll get us another.”

As Michael began to reach for his wallet, LeRoy stopped him. “On me. I’m the one who’s bending your ear. I just need someone to tell this to. I’ll buy the next round.” By the time he returned a few moments later with two new glasses full of ale, Michael had emptied his first pint.

LeRoy settled in his seat and straight away said, “Can you believe it? I got demoted to doing community service at a thrift store on Haight Street in San Francisco. I’m back paying my dues again. I get stuck with the schlep work, I have to stock shelves, price items, assist in putting out furniture displays. I want to do what I do best, you know? Write tags. Change things. Do something meaningful again.”

LeRoy was personable and friendly and Michael was warming to the man if not his story. “Can anyone become an elf?” he asked.

LeRoy said, “In theory. But you gotta start young. I don’t recommend you try it now at your age what with the management career you already have lined up.”

“Why not?” Michael was not to be put off so easily. The idea was too new and maybe the second beer had something to do with him wanting to work for Santa Claus.

“I used to have this argument with my brother,” LeRoy continued. “Stephen would say, ‘You can’t become a brain surgeon.’ I told him, ‘Oh, I could become a brain surgeon. It’s just that not a lot of people would have confidence in me, certainly not enough to hire me to dig through their gray matter. But I could be a brain surgeon if I so desired.’”

Michael had his own view on that. He argued that not everyone can be what they want to be in life, and so the evening turned to night and two more rounds of beer were ordered and consumed. Eventually, LeRoy said, “I have a little Howee left in the cupboard if you care to come by my place to sample it. It’s quite unique and I’d like to offer you a dram.”

Michael glanced at his wrist, decided he had already drunk dinner and sure, why not. LeRoy led the way three blocks from the store to an apartment on Page Street. It was a second floor flat in a six unit building. He unlocked the front door and said, “In the kitchen. I keep it frozen.”

Somehow that made perfect sense to Michael.

LeRoy was frugal with his beverage. The pour might generously be described as less than a finger. Michael was sure there was not enough in his glass to have any affect although it ought to at least impart some idea of the flavor of the drink. He was sure there was nothing behind the liquid that might make him woozy. He took a sip.

Barely past his lips and his throat began to scream with the fire of a thousand blast furnaces. His eyes went cross in his head, the hair on the back of his neck not only stood

up, but he could smell the roots as they began to smolder and a thin blue stream of smoke wafted up from his neckline under the shirt collar.

“Good, hunh?” LeRoy said as he downed his portion. It had an effect on him, but nowhere near the effect it had on Michael.

When he lifted it to pour more, first tilting the bottle over Michael’s glass, then over his own, LeRoy muttered, “Rats. It’s empty.” With this observation, he held the bottle upside down above his glass until three final drops drifted into his tumbler. Then he took the bottle over to the sink and filled it with tap water. LeRoy screwed the cap on tightly.

He reached for a sheet of paper full of die cut squares and, with a wink toward Michael, LeRoy wrote “Howee” in long hand on one. He pulled the sticky backed white label off the sheet and stuck it to the bottle. He set this on the table in front of Michael.

“Go on, pour some into your glass.”

Michael thought this would be amusing and did as he was told. An amber liquid spilled out of the mouth of the bottle, obviously not water, and the aroma of the potent liquor he had just sampled wafted up from the glass. He put the bottle down, raised the glass to his nose and inhaled.

“I’ll be damned,” he said as he eyed the tumbler. He took a sip and felt the same rush of fire run down his throat, the burning on the back of his neck, smelled the stink of smoke from the hairs there. The only thing he did not do this time was go cross-eyed. And this time he rather enjoyed the warm feeling that hit the pit of his stomach and spread to all his limbs within seconds.

“Not bad, eh?” the little man opposite him said.

Michael was impressed. The conversation and the pouring went on long into the night. At one point LeRoy said, "I must confess a certain sympathy for all things German. Still, Wallgau is in Bavaria, therefore I favor BMW over Mercedes. It's a personal thing."

Michael asked Santa's history. LeRoy warmed to the subject. "Nicholas the monk was born around 280 A. D in modern day Turkey although it was then called Patara. The patron saint of children and sailors, by the time I was born no saint was more popular in Europe than Nicholas. I grew up in Germany calling him Nikolaus. No matter what his name, he is still the best darn saint a boy could have."

Later on, many drinks later in fact, LeRoy confided, "I prefer Howee to When."

"What's When?" Michael was able to ask without stumbling over his words.

"A similar elixir but fruitier. It's found in galaxies far, far away."

At some point one or the other of them said, "It's getting late." Michael pulled his coat on and thanked LeRoy for his hospitality. "One of these days I'll have to give you a couple bottles of my home brew."

"You didn't tell me you make beer," LeRoy said as he stood by the door to see his friend off toward home. He seemed genuinely enthused by the idea.

"Oh, yah. And good stuff too. If I can remember, I'll bring you a bottle. Thanks again. See you at work."

The door closed behind him and Michael strode off drunkenly into the night.

Curiously, the next morning Michael clearly recalled the entire conversation of the night before and he had absolutely no hangover. He was late to work, however, and had to punch his time card under the stern gaze of Miss Gideon who was in the break room when he arrived.

The morning was uneventful and the day seemed to hold no unexpected surprises. LeRoy went about his business pulling or pushing a hand cart around the store. He plucked donated items from the cart, rarely needing to consult his price sheet, wrote the amount on a white tag which he stuck to the article. Then he placed the item in an appropriate section of the store.

One of the clerks did not show up that day which meant Michael was out on the floor instead of in the office. But it was a welcome change from his regular routine which kept him more isolated than involved. He was rearranging several items of furniture, a bedroom dresser and vanity set with an Oriental motif, when he heard the plea for help. He looked toward the sound and saw an older woman bent over a man lying prone on the cold linoleum floor.

“Call an ambulance,” the woman shouted. “Someone dial 911. Help! My husband is having a heart attack!”

Everyone in the store was alerted to the situation and several began stabbing cell phone pads. Miss Gideon arrived and pulled the woman away from the victim. She began using CPR on him. She pinched his nose shut, held his chin to open his mouth and blew a lungful of air into him. Then she released and pressed down on his chest to force him to exhale. She performed this at least five times without any significant change. She looked up at the crowd and asked, “Did anyone get through to the emergency number?”

“I did,” a patron said. “They should be here any minute.”

Gideon returned to her emergency breathing technique, but the man remained unable to do this on his own. His eyes were closed and Michael could see there was little, if any, sign of life.

At that point LeRoy walked up and stuck a white price tag on the man's chest. Michael caught a glimpse of it as Gideon pushed the little man out of the way saying, "What in the world are you doing?"

"I'm saving his life," LeRoy replied without the least hint of irony.

Gideon pressed on the man's chest, released, took hold of the chin, was in the act of inhaling and just when it was least expected and with a start as if being hit with a paddle, the man suddenly sucked in a gasping lungful of air. He began breathing on his own and Gideon sat back. She placed a pillow handed to her by Michael under the man's head.

A siren could be heard approaching.

Fifteen minutes later the store was back to a state that could be called normal. The mailman arrived, invoices were sorted, the business mail distributed with one minor exception: a personal letter addressed to Baptistin "LeRoy" Kraft. Michael handed the envelope to LeRoy but stood next to him with a serious expression on his face. His eyes were half closed in a squint that meant he wanted to penetrate a mystery, clear something up between them.

"I saw what you wrote, LeRoy."

"Hey, I was just doing my job."

"We went over this yesterday. Price tags, yes. Name tags, no."

"Can I help it if I acted in the heat of battle? It was a life or death situation. I had to do something since Miss Gideon's CPR didn't seem to be working."

Michael said accusatorily, "Are you taking credit for someone else's efforts? You don't think your note actually had any effect on the guy, do you?"

LeRoy was as surprised by Michael's statement as he was to receive a piece of mail. He began opening it, scanned the contents before handing it to Michael for examination. He said "I guess someone else believes my labeling worked. Here. Read this."

Michael saw there were but five words in the body of the letter: "All is forgiven. Return home." It was signed S. Claus.

What LeRoy had written on the tag he pasted to the man's coat pocket was in longhand and read, "Living Breathing Human."

"Just remember," LeRoy said taking off his blue apron. "Ears don't make the man. It was nice knowing you and having a few beers, but I gotta go. Say goodbye to anyone who cares and you can donate my last pay check to the thrift store. I gotta run. As you can see, I can go home now."

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