A Kris-Less Story

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"What'll ya have, Pizzie?"

"Call me Hank! I've told you three times; my name is Hank now," Pizzie growled in an attempt at a deepening his elfin voice.

Queep placed his hand on the arm of his old friend.

"Uh, sorry Hank. I'll try to remember. Honest. Now, whattaya say we have a drink?"

Pizzie jumped up onto the bar stool, rolled up his sleeves and grunted.

"Bourbon and a beer, what else? And if that bartender hits me with that old 'how about a short one' gag, this stool is going across his skull."

Queep tried to suppress a chuckle at his friend's affected voice, which sounded disturbingly like John Wayne after a hit from a helium balloon.

"Hey, Hank, it's cool. Tommy's a good guy, so get the chip off your shoulder, ok?" Then, to the bartender, "Hey, Tommy, when you get a minute!"

Tommy lumbered over, easily the biggest man Pizzie had ever seen. He reached out with his massive hand, looked Pizzie squarely in the eye and smiled.

"Name's Tommy, nice ta meet ya."

Pizzie grabbed Tommy's hand and squeezed tightly.

"Hank. Same here, pal," he growled.

The tiny hand felt like that of an eight-year-old, but Tommy let Pizzie believe he'd won the grip contest.

"So, what'll it be guys?"

When Tommy turned to fetch their drinks, Queep leaned into Pizzie.

"So, tell me Piz- I mean Hank- tell me how you're doing."

Things had been tough on the whole crew since the big layoff five years earlier. Everyone hoped it was temporary until word came out that the factory was to be demolished.

"How do you think I'm doing, Queep? I've just about burned through my savings, and I haven't been able to land a job yet. Claretta left me six months ago, and I don't know which way to turn. The bottom fell out, man. You seem to be doing ok; what's your story?"

Queep thanked Tommy for dropping off the drinks and took a draw on his beer.

"Well, the old man was always good about annual bonuses, and I was lucky enough to invest pretty well, so I have enough dough to live on for another year or two if I'm careful."

Using both his hands, which barely encircled his beer mug, Pizzie toasted his friend's luck and took a long gulp. He wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.

"Good fer you, old buddy," he grunted.

Queep began to feel sorry for his old friend, knowing he'd be devastated if he were to realize how his macho affectations came across as more comical than masculine. He wished Pizzie would quit trying to be something he was not.

"Well," said Pizzie, "ain't nothin' out there for out-of-work elves anymore. I mean, who'll hire me, and for what? What am I gonna do, catch on with a circus? Even if I were to sink to that level, with all this PC crap going on, nobody even wants to make fun of elves anymore! I used to think elves who sold out were losers, but then I think about what Aurelius did, and I wonder who's the loser."

Aurelius was the supervisor of the radio assembly shop, until the advent of TV drove demand down to the point where they had to shut the line down. Aurelius was just about the smartest elf Queep had ever met, and there were rumors that his IQ was in the one-sixties.

Queep had mixed feelings about how Aurelius had coped with the layoff. No one could question how successful he'd been, but somehow it didn't seem right.

Pizzie shook his head.

"Of all the names he could've picked, he calls himself Dopey and hits the jackpot. Dopey, my foot. The guy's a hundred and thirty-somethin' years old, gotta be getting over a mill per year in residuals, and I hear he's still sleeping with Snow White. His whole crew- all six of them - rode the gravy train on his coat tails. They're all rich now, all retired too. I don't know, the more I think about it the more it seems like selling out ain't such a bad idea. But, like I said, Queep, it's different now.

"Two members of the old crew did hit it big by getting shows on TV. Remember when Bartholomew got that role on Fantasy Island? And Sneezle got a huge deal by changing his name to Webster. But I haven't seen any others make it big by selling out."

Queep looked out the window, mesmerized by the swirling snow under the streetlight outside the bar. He thought back to the old days: the magic in the air, with plenty of work and pay for everyone.

The boss had been just about the most important person in the whole world back then and being part of his crew was a blessing that Queep didn't fully appreciate until now. Everyone loved the big guy, and by extension, everyone loved all his helpers.

Shaking his head, Queep sighed and pondered how everything seemed to have fallen apart. The world was such a different place now, and even though Queep had been known as the most relentlessly optimistic elf in the whole workshop, he now found himself battling a profound depression.

Pizzie drained the last of his beer, slammed the mug down harder than he needed to, and belched obnoxiously.

"Man, that's good brew. So, what are you going to do next, Queep? You always had a plan, always had an upbeat thing to say. What's next, buddy?"

Queep took a deep breath, let it out slowly.

"Well, Hank, I've been thinking."

Just as Queep paused to gather his thoughts, the door swung open. The man who swaggered in looked so completely out of place that Queep couldn't help but stare.

In a barroom full of flannel shirts and overalls, his crisply pressed tan slacks, powder blue silk shirt and navy-blue blazer screamed *I am slumming*.

His fake-tan skin was the color of circus peanuts, and it contrasted with the bright gold chain around his neck and his perfectly coiffed mane of white hair. Sunglasses and loads of gaudy jewelry completed the look: a cross between a mafia don and a used car salesman who'd hit the lottery.

Queep was surprised to realize the man was striding directly toward him. He nudged Pizzie, nodding his chin in the direction of the approaching man.

"Geez, get a load of that guy," whispered Pizzie, "must be lost."

Walking directly toward Queep and Pizzie, the man hesitated for a few seconds to light a cigarette, then advanced toward Queep, who turned to face him.

"Queep, is that you?"

Queep nearly fainted when he recognized the voice; it was unmistakable. Years ago, it had been the most famous voice in the world. He was clean-shaven, tall and trim, but there was no mistaking that voice!

Struggling to regain his composure, Queep spun on his stool to face the man.

“Holy cow. It’s you! I can’t believe it.”

The big man's smile was dazzling, his teeth impossibly white against his faux-bronze skin.

“You betcha! It’s me, alright. Queep, Pizzie, it's good to see you two.”

Pizzie had been staring in disbelief, completely abandoning his Hank persona.

“Santa?”

“Call me Chris: that’s C-H-R-I-S, not with a K,” he bellowed in his jackhammer bass voice. Putting one multi-ringed hand on each of their shoulders, he tilted his head toward the back-room seating area and said,

“Been looking for you; let’s talk, boys.”

Instinctively, they scampered down off their stools and followed him. His tremendous weight loss made him appear much taller than they remembered. Somehow this made them both become acutely aware of their diminutive stature as they nearly had to run to keep up with his purposeful strides.

Picking out a relatively private table, he turned a chair around and straddled it, leaning his folded arms on the chair’s back as he sat down.

He took off his shades and said, “Sit down, boys. Let me get you a round.”

He ground out his cigarette, motioned for Tommy to come over, and smiled at them. Queep noticed that his eyes were sill the color of a glacier on a clear summer day, but there was something different about them now. Cold as a glacier now, he thought.

“Chris? Man, it’s hard to call you that; gonna take some getting used to. You look so- so…”

Uncharacteristically, Queep was at a loss for words.

“So freakin’ Hollywood,” snapped Pizzie, “like a cross between Kenny Rodgers and George Hamilton. You had plastic surgery, man?”

Pizzie set his chin, always scrappy and confrontational.

“Relax, Pizzie. Yeah, I’m different now. Everything is different now. It’s a new world, and I’m working it.”

Pizzie shook his head in disbelief, struggling to regain his air of confidence.

“Yeah, well I got a new name now, too. You can call me Hank,” he growled as he puffed out his tiny chest.

Queep stared at the table, immobilized, as Chris continued.

“Look, guys, I can understand how you’d have a problem adjusting to seeing the new me, but you gotta realize I did what I had to do. Things have changed; the old ways are gone forever. Sure, it’s sad, but what am I gonna do, sit around and mope? A guy’s gotta make a living, am I right? A guy's gotta do what a guy's gotta do!”

Finally, Queep gathered enough composure to speak up.

“But you’re - I mean - you *were* Santa! For God’s sake, what happened to you? We all looked up to you. Kids all over the world loved you, and so did their parents. You were Christmas to everyone, everywhere. Look at you now!”

Leaning forward with a stern look in his eyes, Chris spoke slowly through gritted teeth.

“Yeah, look at me now. I got thirty grand worth of jewelry on me, a two-hundred-thousand-dollar limo outside with my own personal goon to drive it. A house in the Bahamas, one in Key West, one in Beverly Hills. More dough than I ever dreamed possible. Yeah, guys, look at me now.”

Chris leaned back, and a smile crept slowly over his face. It had the eerie effect of accentuating his now wrinkle-free features in a manner that was about the furthest thing from jolly that Queep could imagine.

Gone was the warmth, the way he could hug you with a smile. Gone was the legendary laugh. The voice was fundamentally the same, but it now had a callousness that left Queep cold. Even the trim physique seemed manufactured, as though it had been purchased somewhere.

“What happened to me? I got wise, that’s what happened. Used to be you’d give a kid a couple of candy canes and a wind-up toy, and he was happy as could be. Act like a freakin’ angel for a whole year. Life was good: happy kids, grateful parents, all nice and cute and warm and fuzzy.

“Now, forget it, especially in America. If the little darlings don’t get five grand worth of electronic gizmos - all made overseas by the way – well, they just aren’t satisfied. Even when their guilt-laden, buy-the-kids-crap-so-they-love-us non-parents do come across with the goods, the little moochers are bored stiff by February, and are looking for more new stuff for Valentine’s Day.

“People talk about commercialization ruining Christmas. I’ll tell you what ruined Christmas: parents, or I should say, the lack of real parents, that’s what ruined Christmas. And now, it’s gone."

The big man paused, smiled, and continued.

"Yeah, I remember when demand for our toys plummeted, and none of us wanted to make high-tech gadgets. Even if we’d wanted to, our factory was a toy factory. Our workers were toy makers. Maybe we should’ve changed. Maybe we were stubborn.

“But making toys was what we did. It was who we were! So, we stuck to our guns and continued to make toys. We laid off a shift here and there and kept plugging with the good old Christmas spirit. But it got worse year after year, until finally I had to close the entire operation. We were rendered obsolete.”

Queep and Pizzie nodded solemnly as the big man continued.

“So, what did I do? Well, I crawled into a bottle for eighteen months; lost everything I had. They foreclosed on the North Pole property. The wife left me when she couldn’t take it anymore. Then, it happened. I decided that I wouldn’t be a chump anymore.

“First, I sold the rights to Comet’s name to Proctor & Gamble for a cool five million. That got me started. Then I got the idea to put Rudolph out to stud. Well, his nose is redder than ever, and I’ll tell you, we’re both really happy these days.

"Within a year, I’d put together enough loot to buy the distribution rights to the whole Christmas franchise: web sites, movies, holiday cards; you name it, every time someone spends a buck on Christmas, my cash register goes ‘ka-ching’. Wait, did I say ‘Christmas’? Of course, I meant to say, generic inclusive secular winter holiday. Don’t want to offend anyone, after all.”

With that, Chris threw his head back and laughed. The raspy, gurgling laugh made Queep long for a ‘Ho, Ho, Ho’. Just once he wished he could hear that magical laugh again.

“So, Chris, you were looking for us? What’s that all about,” asked Pizzie, raising his voice to be heard above the big man's laughter.

Chris sighed and cleared his throat.

“Pizzie - I mean, Hank - you're right, let’s talk about that. You see, I have a few new businesses going, and I can’t tell you how hard it is getting good help. Nobody - I mean nobody - works like my former employees. You guys were without exception the most dedicated, industrious, trustworthy employees a guy could ever wish for. So, as I started branching out into video games I began hiring people from my old crew.

“Of course, they needed training. But they were hungry and adapted quickly. Now things are going great for all of us. I get top-notch help, which is incredibly difficult to come by these days. The elves get meaningful jobs with good pay and benefits. I don’t have to tell you nothing is more miserable than an elf with nothing to do. You guys are programmed to be busy. I’ve hired most of the old crew, and you guys are two of the few I haven’t tracked down yet.”

Pizzie sat up straight and lifted his chin, invigorated by this new glimmer of hope. While Queep was glad to see the excitement rising in his old friend, he couldn’t help feeling apprehensive about the whole discussion. Sitting across from them was the man himself, Santa! But he’d morphed into a super-materialistic player whose presence made Queep feel like he needed to take a shower.

Pizzie said, “So, what do you have in mind, Chris? Talk to us.”

“Well, Hank, you see it’s like this. I have a totally new concept that’s already making me another fortune. This idea will capitalize on what Americans with dough really want these days. Tell me, boys, do you know what Americans want nowadays?”

Neither Queep nor Pizzie answered, but Chris continued as though he didn’t expect them to.

“Come on, boys, what do you think they want?”

Still, no reply.

“Well, listen. People want gadgets. They love tech gizmos so much they’ll gobble up any shiny new thing with the right marketing pitch.”

Chris paused and leaned forward.

“My latest invention is selling like hotcakes. Can’t make them fast enough. So, I need to open another factory, and I need a foreman and a distribution expert to help me get it off the ground. You guys came to mind. Let me tell you, the money will be great. I’ll cut you in for a piece of the profits, and you’ll both be rolling in it within six months.”

“I’m in,” Pizzie said, “when do I start?”

Queep raised his eyebrows and took off his cap.

“Hang on. We don’t even know what the product is. And I don’t like the sound of this. It seems to me like we'd be scamming people.”

With that, Pizzie and Chris both looked at Queep.

“Duh,” they said, in unison.

“Okay,” Queep said, “Okay, at least tell me about the product. What is it? Will people like it? Does it do anyone any good? You know how we are, Chris, we gotta believe in what we make.”

Chris shook his head and lowered his voice.

“You’d be surprised how quickly you get over that. But just to make you feel better, I can assure you that the people buying these products are very happy with them. I’ve hit on the perfect trifecta: people get to show off the latest techno-gizmo; they get to pamper themselves; and they really think they're doing their part to help the environment. So yeah, my answer to you is that this product will make people happy.”

Queep struggled to suppress his mounting anger at Chris’ cynicism. This had to be the mother of all sellouts. He couldn’t believe it.

“Chris, what is this product?”

“Well, I’ve sold over five hundred of these babies already, and demand is mounting. Make them for about three grand apiece, and the gullible knuckleheads – uh, I mean loyal customers - are lining up to pay me twenty-five grand a pop! I could name my price, but after all, I have my ethical limits.”

Again, the eerie laugh.

Pizzie broke in, “Okay, so?”

Chris wiped a tear from the corner of his eye and struggled to control his laughter.

“Solar powered tanning booths! Can you believe it? *Solar powered tanning booths*! They don’t even get the joke. It’s perfect. They shovel their dough to me by the ton, and I give them a BS product that makes fun of them every time they use it. What could be better?”

Chris and Pizzie broke into laughter, with Chris’ booming bass drowning out Pizzie’s lilting elfin giggle. As they shook hands and quieted down, both turned their heads toward Queep.

“Come on, Queep, this is beautiful,” Pizzie said, “We could be back at work, making stuff! Running our own factory. Never mind the big cash, we’ll actually have a purpose again. What do you say?”

Queep pushed his chair away from the table.

“I’m outta here. You guys do what you gotta do. This ain’t for me.”

Pizzie snapped at Queep.

“Listen, mister holier-than-thou, let me tell you something.”

Queep slammed his tiny fist on the table.

“No, Pizzie you listen - “

“Told you a hundred times, my name is Hank now!”

“No, you listen to me. I’m sorry, but you’ll always be ‘Pizzie’ to me. I just can’t call you ‘Hank’ any longer. I got no beef with you. Go ahead and do whatever you think is right for you, I ain’t judging. You go work with Santa, or Chris or whatever you want to call him. But I gotta do what’s right for me.”

Queep stood up, offered his hand to his old friend.

Pizzie hesitated, then took his hand.

“Tell me, Queep, what are you gonna do?”

“Well, I’m an elf; I make toys for kids. It’s what I’ve always done, and it’s what I gotta do now. I have a few bucks saved up, and maybe I can use them to find a way to do what I was born to do. Good luck to you guys, really. But an elf’s gotta do what an elf’s gotta do.”

With that, Queep turned and headed briskly toward the door, putting on his jacket as he scampered away.

After Chris and Pizzie sat in silence for a moment, Chris raised his glass and chuckled.

“An elf’s gotta do what an elf’s gotta do.”

Pizzie gazed silently into his glass and sighed.

"Come on, Hank, bottoms up," bellowed Chris.

"Yeah," Pizzie whispered, "an elf's gotta do what an elf's gotta do alright."

He shook his head, slowly placed his glass on the table, rose, and bolted toward the door.

"Wait up, Queep!"

END