

Quink

Quink

By H. Courreges LeBlanc

13 May 2002

Alexia would be here for the Todd any minute. I was about to squirt the boog in when I heard a cop clump up the back stairs, dragging Pink Jenny behind him. They were two flights down, but Pink Jenny was screaming her throat raw. I wondered which cop it was this time, come to squeeze another trick. Probably Gastineau.

I squirted the boog in. The Todd twitched all over, damn near grand mal. Pissed itself too. But I was in a hurry.

The Todd draped its legs over the edge of the table and hung its head between its knees. It wasn't breathing yet. "Go upstairs and put some clothes on," I said, kicking its shin. It didn't move. "Go on. I'll buzz you when I'm ready for you."

"Do you have any idea who my daddy is?" Pink Jenny shrieked. "I'll have your badge — I'll have your fucking balls on a skewer. Ow!"

The Todd, finally breathing, lurched to its feet and shambled toward the stairs. A boog this complex took a while for a retread like the Todd to soak up, and until it did it would be pretty shaky. Retreads were a royal pain — much higher maintenance, more bribes, more hassles from the cops. But I could field a dozen retreads for the cost of one catalog slug — Dixie DNA's catalog items were for the hobbyist, not for the trade. Not any trade I could afford, anyway.

Before the Todd was halfway to the door, Pink Jenny stumbled in, followed by the cop. It was that thug Gastineau, of course, smirking as he shoved Pink Jenny down onto the floor. He would definitely try to squeeze a trick. No point in being nice.

"Hey maggie," I said coolly.

"Don't you maggie me, quink," Gastineau said. "How many times I told you to keep your yigs off Decatur?"

"Who are you calling a yig?" Pink Jenny said. "I'm Lourdes Villard — I'm the Count's daughter."

“Jenny, shut up,” I told her, and she shut. I put that trope in all my boogs. Her eyes were still spitting fire but her lips could only squirm like eels.

The Todd was trying to maneuver around Gastineau and Pink Jenny; it kept bumping into the wall. “Let it past,” I said.

“Aw, fuck him,” Gastineau said, shoving the Todd onto the floor next to Pink Jenny. It lay on its side, facing the wall, sawing its legs in confusion. “I ain’t joking about keeping these yigs off Decatur.”

I brushed past Gastineau and helped the Todd to its feet.

“I’m talking to you, quink,” Gastineau said.

But I ignored him and shepherded the Todd to the stairwell. I couldn’t let Alexia see it this way. Anyway, why shouldn’t I make Gastineau wait? Finally, when the Todd was climbing the stairs in its docile torpor, I turned back to Gastineau. “Look, maggie. The trick loaded Jenny into a boat just after lunch. Said she wanted her till dawn tomorrow.”

“Well, this yig was rampaging around the Cotillion ten minutes ago,” Gastineau said. “Trying to find the Count.”

I shrugged.

“You got a bad attitude,” Gastineau said. “If the Count finds out you booged his daughter, he’ll have your ass.”

“Don’t you know better than to try to scare a quink, maggie?” I said. “Besides, who you think booged her in the first place?”

That shut him up. These cops held the Count in almost superstitious awe, but I knew better. Gastineau just glared at the wall, trying not to think about why the Count had booged his own daughter.

“Charming as all this is, maggie,” I said, “I’m busy. So kindly get thee the fuck thither.”

“Stop calling me maggie, goddammit,” he growled.

I shrugged.

“One day, quink,” he said, “the Count’s gonna stop protecting you. I’ll be waiting for that day.”

“On that day,” I said, “a two-bit crooked cop like you will be the least of my troubles.”

Pink Jenny clambered to her feet and made a dash for the stairwell.

“Damn,” Gastineau said, and dove after her.

She had one arm through the door when he slammed into her. She raked her nails across his cheek. He grabbed a fistful of that lush cashew-colored hair that made Pink Jenny so popular, twisted her arm behind her in a vicious half nelson, and dragged her up to my face.

“Dump the boog,” he said, twisting the fistful of hair. “Bring up the base personality. I’m gonna make that bitch pay.”

“For what a boog did? Even you aren’t that stupid.”

He shoved Pink Jenny toward me, twisting her hair in his fist. “Dump the boog, quink, before I decide to take it out on you.”

Pink Jenny jerked her head back and around, tearing some hair out, and sank her teeth into his forearm.

“Jenny, listen,” I said. Pink Jenny immediately stopped struggling and turned to face me. I leaned in, my lips brushing against her ear, and whispered the dump word. Then I whispered another word, the one that triggered another boog — the Little Victim. Cops always loved the Little Victim. That’s why Gastineau hadn’t cuffed her. He wanted her to fight. Of course, the Lourdes was fighting too — but the Lourdes fought to win. Gastineau needed to dominate a woman who wasn’t as strong as him, the Little Victim who propped up his manhood by fighting and failing. He needed to believe that’s who Jenny really was.

Base personality my ass. Yigs didn’t have one, not even retreats. But people believed what they needed. They were all of them blinded by emotion.

Being a quink was much simpler.

She glared at him from under her cascade of hair, lips pouting, breasts sliding up and down beneath the clingy fabric of her blouse as she heaved each breath. She looked really sexy for a retread — almost catalog. She pursed her lips, then spat at Gastineau. He wiped the spittle away, his lips twisted in a rictus halfway between a snarl and a smile.

Just as Gastineau cocked his fist back, the stairwell door opened again.

It was Alexia, a tan raincoat over one arm and a suitcase in her other hand. She was wearing an ankle-length sundress, yellow with small blue flowers, and canvas sneakers that had once been white. No socks. She had a mosquito bite on her right ankle that she'd scratched raw. When she saw Gastineau, her eyes (eyes too light, too lit from within, to be called merely brown — more of a burnished bronze or smoked gold) widened.

“Claude,” she said. “What are you doing here?”

Gastineau unclenched his fist. His hand dropped to his side. His fingers fumbled at the snap that held his nightstick to his belt. “I’m on duty,” he said. “Routine inquiry.”

“You know him?” I asked.

Alexia blushed and dropped her eyes. “I went to school with Claude. We .❖.❖. we dated in high school.”

Gastineau scowled at the floor, then shot me a poisonous glare.

“What?” I said, holding my palms up. “I didn’t say a word.”

“It was a long time ago,” Alexia said.

“Not that long,” Gastineau said.

She pointed with her chin at Pink Jenny, crouching on all fours before him. “Who’s your friend?”

Gastineau blushed furiously, and gave me another dirty look I hadn’t earned.

“Jenny’s one of my retr—” I stopped myself, then tried again. “I mean she works here. She’s one of our performers.”

“Oh.” She glanced at Gastineau, then at Jenny. Then at the floor.

I turned to Pink Jenny. “Jenny, listen.”

Jenny stood up, regarding me.

I leaned in and whispered the dump word again. Her face went slack. “Now go back to your room,” I said out loud. She walked to the stairwell, expressionless, heading for her “room” — which, of course, was really a suspension vat.

Gastineau watched Pink Jenny leave, his jaw working. He glared at me again, then turned back to Alexia. “This isn’t a nice place. You shouldn’t be here.”

She lifted her chin. “I’m visiting a friend.”

“Anyone who’s here couldn’t really be your friend,” he said. “Let me take you home.”

“I don’t want your help, Claude,” Alexia said. “I thought I made that clear.”

His fist clenched, unclenched, clenched again. Then finally unclenched. “Fine,” he hissed. “Don’t come crying to me, then.”

She averted her gaze. “I won’t.”

He opened the stairwell door, then scowled at me.

“Thanks for your assistance, officer,” I said.

He slammed the door behind him and stomped down the stairs.

“You have the nicest friends,” I said.

Alexia rubbed the bridge of her nose. “I don’t know what I was thinking when I was dating Claude.”

“Thinking never entered into it,” I said.

She grimaced and stuck her tongue out at me. “You don’t know anything about it.”

“Touch💎,” I said.

She colored. “I didn’t mean that the way it sounded.”

I forced a grin. “Are you worried about hurting my feelings?”

She didn’t answer for a long time. Then she looked up at me. “What’s it like?” she asked. “Not having feelings?”

“I have them,” I said. “I just can’t feel them.”

“If you don’t feel them, then they’re not feelings. That’s what feelings are.”

I looked away. So easy to say that. If you don’t understand it, it doesn’t exist. Never mind about lying awake at three in the morning, staring at the ceiling, guts churning, face drenched with cold sweat. “Guess so.”

“Anyway, I don’t believe you,” Alexia said. “How can you play guitar the way you do without feelings?”

Alexia had great talent at believing what suited her. “Where’s your guitar?” I asked. “You can play guitar without feelings, maybe, but you sure can’t play guitar without a guitar.”

She looked away. “I didn’t bring it. I guess I’ll have to skip my lesson this week.”

I looked again — her bulging suitcase, her worn shoes, her tired eyes. I hoped she hadn’t pawned the guitar. Then, on second thought, I hoped she had. At least that would be better than having it stolen from her — or extorted — by some low-life flophouse night clerk.

I reached behind me and grabbed my own guitar, cradled on its tripod stand. “You’re not off the hook that easily,” I said. “Use my guitar this week.”

She smiled. “It’s all right.”

“No, it’s not,” I said, thrusting the guitar at her. “You have to practice. Music isn’t something you know. It’s something you do.”

She took the guitar, locking eyes with me. “You’re such a good friend. Why are you so good to me?”

“Shut up and play,” I said, lighting a cigarette. I was nobody’s friend, least of all hers. “This week, it’s bar chords.”

She went through the motions for about fifteen minutes. But she wasn’t concentrating. Finally I just pressed my palm against the strings, muting the botched chord.

She looked up at me, her face inches from mine. I could feel the warmth of her exhalations, smelling of bitter coffee and scorched milk. There really wasn’t a word to describe the color of her eyes. “What?” she said. “I’m trying, really.”

I pulled the guitar gently from her grasp. “Better to not play at all than to play without concentrating.” I set the guitar down. “Better to just talk.”

She heaved a sigh. “Talk won’t help.”

“The pastry business isn’t taking off?” I said.

“I’ve been to every restaurant in the French Quarter,” she said. “I’ve spent a fortune baking up free samples. Everyone eats them, and everyone loves them, but no one will give me a chance.”

“You’re good,” I said. “It just takes time.”

“That’s not true.” She brushed the hair back from her eyes. “It also takes a kitchen.”

I glanced at her suitcase in the corner. “You got kicked out.”

“I put all my money into the business,” she said. “There wasn’t enough for rent. I offered Ren a piece of the action, but he preferred cash. Hotel clerks are touchy about that kind of thing.”

She wouldn’t quite meet my eye, so I knew that Ren had wanted a piece of a

different kind of action. Well, so did I. I set the guitar back in its stand. “Now what? Back home to your mom?”

She scowled. “I couldn’t go back there.”

“Don’t be too sure,” I said.

“Even if I could, I wouldn’t.”

“Well,” I said. “What, then?”

She looked at the floor, then looked up at me.

“Oh no,” I said.

“Please? It would just be for a while.”

“No,” I said. “Absolutely not. No no no. Stop crying, dammit.”

“I thought you liked me.”

“Gastineau was right,” I said. “This isn’t a nice place.”

“Todd is nice,” she said. “You’re nice.”

There is no Todd, I almost said. You’re in love with an illusion. When no one is paying for him, Todd lies face down in a vat, eyes rolled back, lungs full of synthetic amniotic fluid. The real Todd, the baseline Todd, was long gone. In theory there were laws protecting the civil liberties of yigs, but thanks to the Count, civil liberties were cheap commodities.

It hadn’t always been like this. There had even once been a watchdog organization — the New Orleans Civil Liberties Union. They’d rescued me when I was a yig. Twice. The second time almost took, too. But the Count had shut down “no-clue” right after his third and final “election.” Nowadays, only loners and losers chose to be yigs. If nobody missed you, you didn’t really exist.

I almost told Alexia all this. It would’ve won the argument. It might have even been good for her, in the long run. I wanted to tell her. But I couldn’t bring myself to do it. She knew — or could, if she really wanted to.

Instead, I said, “You wouldn’t see Todd any more than you do now. Less, in fact. Todd’s time costs money.”

“You don’t always charge me.”

“That would have to change.”

“I wouldn’t see him too much.”

“How would you feel, seeing him when he was someone else? His eyes gliding over you, blank and unrecognizing?”

She stuck out her chin. “You’re just trying to scare me.”

“Yes, I am,” I said. “You should be scared.”

“You’re so cold.”

“I am what I am,” I said.

“That’s not what I meant, and you know it.”

“Look, Alexia,” I said. “Even if I thought it was a good idea — even if I wanted to — I couldn’t let you stay here. Your pal Gastineau is looking for an excuse to shut me down. The only ones who can stay here are the yigs.”

“I hate that word. Can’t you call them performers?”

“Sure. Fine. Performers.” As if the word could change what they were. Yigs. Whores. Slaves.

“Anyway,” she said, “it’s not just performers that stay here. You stay here. Couldn’t I stay with you?”

Yes, she could. And how I yearned for her to. Auditing the experiences of the Todd would never be enough. I wanted her in real time. But if she stayed, she’d find out about the Todd. Well, I wanted her to know. If she knew where the personality matrix really came from, maybe .❖.❖.

“There would be trouble when it got out.”

“Not if I was a performer.”

There it was, then, laid out on a silver platter. Sweet Alexia, dumped into a boog. What a simple tweak it would be to transfer her love from the Todd to me. I could have her any time I wanted. She didn't have the looks for a commercial yig, either. She'd be all mine. Certainly her mother wouldn't bother looking for her. Hell, I wouldn't even need to put her on the books. No one would ever miss her.

And her boog would be a big seller, especially in Jenny's lush body. Beauty and sweetness in one package — that's what everyone wanted, but of course people like that didn't really exist; beauty is power, and power changes you. But I could make her exist, and the tricks would lap her up. What a relief that would be — no more hate-fucks. Happy clientele. I wouldn't cringe or wince when I audited.

No more nightmares. No more long lonely sleepless nights.

My face was drenched with sweat, but my mouth was completely dry. I opened my lips, but nothing came out. I pushed harder, and something in me pushed back. Finally — for the first time in years — I fought that something down, and squeezed out a single syllable of my own.

“No.”

She was still crying when the Todd came downstairs. “Hey, baby, what's wrong?”

“Oh, Todd!” She wrapped her arms around him and buried her face in his shoulder. He patted her on the back. His pats gradually softened into strokes. Slid further and further down. He planted gentle kisses on top of her head, working his way slowly toward her lips. She turned her head up toward him. They kissed. Slow, moist, lingering. Then, with a sigh, she rested her head on his shoulder, looking at me.

“Feeling better?” the Todd asked.

She nodded, still looking at me.

“Want to go upstairs?”

Another nod. Still looking.

“What?” I finally said.

“All this time I’ve known you, I’ve never asked,” she said. “What’s your name?”

I looked away. How the fuck should I know? That was a long time ago. Before I became a quink — even before being a yig. “Edmund,” I said.

She smiled. “That was my father’s name.”

I knew that, of course; that’s why I’d chosen it. “Go on,” I said, waving a hand toward the stairs.

“I can’t afford to pay,” she said.

“No charge tonight.”

She dimpled. “You can be so sweet.”

I shrugged.

“Come on,” the Todd said, tugging her toward the stairs.

After they were upstairs, I lit another cigarette and punched up the silf for the front door.

“What’s up, quink?”

“You know Alexia?”

“The one with the eyes? Here every Tuesday night?”

“That’s her.” I took a drag. “She’s blackballed after tonight.”

“I thought she was your squish.”

“Just blackball her before I degauss your digital ass.”

“Fine. She’s blackballed. Sheesh. Quinks can be so damn touchy.” It dropped the connection.

I leaned back in my chair. In that hard unyielding wooden chair, the same chair I sat in every night. A splotch of moonlight leaked through the filthy window, and lay on the wall just over Alexia's suitcase.

I picked up my guitar, cradled it in my lap, put it down again without playing a note. I blotted sweat from my forehead with the back of my hand.

Through the ceiling, I heard the rhythmic squeaking of bedsprings. After a few minutes, I heard Alexia's long, slow, shivering sigh.

The cigarette was like scorched sawdust in my mouth; I stubbed it out. Then I lit another one. While moonlight crept imperceptibly up the wall, I tried to remember how despair felt.

Copyright (c) 2002 H. Courreges LeBlanc

"Quink," by H. Courreges LeBlanc, is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.

If you redistribute this story, please include a link to

<http://www.strangehorizons.com/2002/20020513/quink.shtml>.