

BYRONICPUNK: Open

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Danny Thanh Nguyen, AKA ByronicPunk, is well known for his ability with floggers and whips, as well as a fiction and non-fiction writer. He's currently working on a book about kink, survivalism and the parallels between the gay leather and kink community and refugees. In this article, Danny shares an honest account of being in an open relationship.

One of the rules of our open relationship was that David and I would talk about our extracurricular sex lives. This time, our update occurred over dinner.

"So there's this boy," David said. He held the lit screen of his iPhone across the table. A young man in a blue hoodie with UCLA arched across the front beamed at me.

We were at David's favorite Vietnamese hole-in-the-wall restaurant, sitting by a mirror framed by Christmas lights even though it was June. Our waitress took our order and was preparing iced coffee in the kitchen. David swiped at his phone, flipping through more photos: a short awkward redhead from a bar, a tanned San Diego tourist.

We were new to this, had no sense of protocol for how these updates were to occur, so we stumbled into sharing stories of our hookups the way we might have spoken about news headlines or rumours about our friends.

David was brick-shaped and wore solid black shirts to make himself look slimmer. He was thirty-three years old at the time, but his face was that of a boy's. In order to attract younger men, he advertised himself as twenty-five in his online profiles. The guys he hooked up with were youthful, like little college-aged Chihuahuas in Diesel jeans. Their bodies were smooth and sleek, their faces doe-eyed and curious. As he flashed their photos across his phone, I suddenly felt my own body hair itching beneath my clothes. My beard grew heavier.

When David asked about my latest hookups, I told him that I hadn't had sex recently. I've only played.

"Play" is code. For the other stuff. The not-sex sex. I didn't abandon vanilla sex, but lately had a trend of meeting guys who like to be tied down and beaten up, or guys who want to do the same to me.

David got quiet, tapping his fingers nervously on the glass table. His eyes glazed. He was fighting to unthink whatever images had swelled up in his mind. Possibly: me clipping clothespins onto a man's nipples then hitting them off with a riding crop. Possibly: me looking like Pinhead from Hellraiser with a leather hood over my head, my mouth panting through the opened zipper-mouth (even though I find these hoods so creepy that they practically auto-safeword themselves from my scenes).

Between bites of our steaming bowls of noodle soup, David finally asked, "What exactly did you do once you had him tied up?"

I could tell the smell of fried garlic would cling to my clothes and hair for the rest of the night. I hesitated to tell David that my last play buddy was deep into titty torture, that in order to elicit a response I had to twist his nipples so rough that they swelled up like rubber bullets, that I could taste the coppery plasma seeping out his skin on my teeth.

I'd been keeping my identities separate. For David's sake, I rarely invoked the kinds of play I engaged in. If I were to explain the details of these scenes—the mouth gags and snakewhips, the sounding rods and violet wands—he'd wince as if I'd pressed on a bruise. He understood that I was wired this way, that it came naturally and couldn't be changed, and the open relationship was one of the ways he showed his support. Still, he found it intimidating.

On the rare occasions he did directly ask for details, I kept the answers polite and brief. He was part of that world of normals. Of soft kisses and cheek caresses and cuddles in beds. He saw me slipping into a world of perverts, a dark wailing place full of roots and torn skin.

After dinner, we slogged ourselves down the sidewalk, back to the car to return to our apartment. The aroma of soup broth filled the sedan. When I turned on the ignition, David

leaned across to kiss me and his lips grazed my five o'clock shadow.

"Ouch!" he said.

Like my kinks, the hair is also starting to bother him. The night before, we were watching TV on the couch and I stretched my bare legs against his, let the hair on my calves rub across his shin. He pulled away, then pantomimed holding up air-clippers as if he were a barber, and made a buzzing sound. He ran the phantom blades up the length of my leg then he took it to my face—Bzzzzzz—as though he were shearing a sheep.

I wasn't always an active kinkster, nor was I always hairy. I used to look like those boys whose pictures he collected on his phone. I once had a 29-inch waist and was his ideal twink: smooth, sleek, a little dumb. I was nineteen-years-old when David and I began dating and was nearing my thirties. My shoulders had broadened, my metabolism had slowed down, and my belly had begun to slope over my belt.

"Your stubble hurts," David says.

"What hurts," I say, "is having to shave my face every day to keep it trimmed."

I had taken to telling my friends that my new goal in life was to become a big fat daddy bear. I was half-joking, but was still 100% serious. I believed in striving for attainable goals.

I repeated the joke to David as we waited for the light to turn green again.

"That's gross," David said.

I tried staving off the natural progression of my weight and body hair through gym routines and an infomercial hair removal product called Nad's. The latter of which was a green goo on strips of fabric that I stuck to my ass and tugged off to remove the hair—and often skin. I lost plenty of money and blood before accepting that I couldn't really grow younger and skinnier; I could only grow older and hairier.

Growing up, one of my favorite Marvel comic book supervillains was The White Queen, who dressed like a drag queen wearing nothing but stark white lingerie, thigh-high boots, a laced-up corset, and mink stole. Her mutant power was telepathy, the ability to influence thought. Over time, she underwent a secondary mutation, like a second puberty. She was still able to read minds, but could now turn her skin into diamonds for self-defense.

There was another mutant in her world who also underwent a secondary mutation: Hank McCoy, codename Beast. His first gift was that of superhuman strength, and then, later in life, he evolved into a big blue furry man-creature.

What I mean to say is: as a kinkster, I was a mutant with superpowers. I had undergone several mutations in my lifetime. And despite feeling like I was bedazzled with diamonds, I had begun to look like an unrecognizable hairy beast to my lover.

A play buddy of mine once explained his parents' divorce with an Albert Einstein quote: "Women marry men hoping they will change. Men marry women hoping they will not. So each is inevitably disappointed."

David and I didn't marry women—we married each other. We made appointments to sign legal papers at City Hall. We followed the judge in his robe up to the top of the marble staircase. We recited vows that echoed under the dome while standing to the side of a bronze bust of Harvey Milk. When the judge asked, "For as long as you both shall live?" we both said our I Do's. We slipped white gold bands onto each other's fingers, understanding the gravity that we would forever be bound to each other. Or so we hoped.

I wonder how successful married couples do it: grow old and happy together, especially when one or both are bound to turn into different people over time. I couldn't decide who David saw when he looked into my eyes at the top of that staircase, impossibly handsome in his black suit as he said that he would love and care for me. Did he think he was marrying a man who happened to be a kinkster that had changed into someone he found acceptable? Or maybe he saw a kinkster who would eventually change into someone who he would find acceptable? Or maybe he thought he married a kinkster who would not change, but he could learn to accept. One of these is true. None of these is true. Or perhaps: all of these are true.

There are bridges that you cross as you grow older, each of them leading to destinations different from where you started. You don't always choose these bridges nor do you choose where they lead you. Becoming a kinky daddy bear is a realistic bridge, something intuitive and obtainable. When I will have crossed onto the other side of that bridge, I wonder if David will still be attracted by what he sees. Or will he be back on the other side, repeating his I Do's to a ghost of me.

David is my lover and he does not know how to do anything but make love to me. He has no sense of roughness, no inner demon to inspire sadism. The last time we made love, it was a night that was too hot for San Francisco, where the muggy air in the apartment stalled in its place like a wool blanket. We were irritated from the weather and each other, had been fighting and fighting and eventually somehow found the resolution, like we always do, after hours of yelling. We had finished having makeup sex—the act of trying to push ourselves together until we were a single cohesive being again—and were lying in a pool of sweat and cum and all the nameless magical elements that exists which bonds two people together before they go spiralling away from each other again.

I got up to go to the bathroom, washed my face and towelled off the sweat from my back. When I returned to the bedroom, David was fast asleep, snoring. He was splayed out across the bed we shared, with an arm reaching over the side, as if he's trying to reach out and tug me towards him with his fingers. At least that's what I told myself. It's an image I needed to see when I looked down at the space he made available in order to find my place.