

# BYRONICPUNK: Masc4Mascara

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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 touches on perceived masculinity within the fetish scene.

For someone who is supposed to be a Dominant, submissives often scare the shit out me.

Sometimes I get approached by guys who, bless them, are so pent up with unfulfilled desires to be used, they end up deluging me with a laundry list of kinky To-Do's.

"I want you to tie me up, then own me by shaving off all my body hair. Afterwards you can spank me till my ass is red and bruised, but don't leave any marks. Then you're going to use my holes any way you want, first with your cock, then toys, then cock, then toys again. Having a collar around my neck totally puts me in the mood to completely submit, so make sure you do that first."

"Hello," I reply. "First off, what is your name? And how did you get past security?"

Their incantations make me feel as though I've stumbled into my own hostage negotiation.

I can empathize with their feverish excitement, though. How many of us have accidentally embarrassed ourselves in front of our crushes from frustrated hormones boiling over to the point of losing all sense of social grace? Still, being on the receiving end of this energy is intimidating and I have difficulty trying to recover: clearly I'm never going to live up to this

fantasy Dom you've predetermined me to be, so why even try? The resulting anxieties cause my genitals to shrivel up, leaving the most I could offer is to staple a popsicle stick to the underside of my dick as a consolation for that erection they so demanded.

Having a penchant for whips, another drawback I experience as a visible S&M player is getting called out in certain gay spaces at inopportune times. I once attended a large orgy organized by friends, a couple who shared a three-story San Francisco house and a co-dependent relationship with their chihuahua, which they allowed to roam freely throughout the party where it contributed to the ambiance by incessantly yapping at the guests trying to fuck on the beds and futons. Summoning a sexy mood around that dog was akin to attempting transcendental meditation in the middle of a hurricane, and I surprised myself when I finally relaxed enough to lean back onto the couch to receive a blowjob from a man I had been cruising all night. But right as I started getting into it, I could feel the presence of someone hovering over us.

"Hey, you're that whip guy!" this stranger said, pointing at my face.

A few months prior, while waiting in line outside a nightclub for a dance party, a half-naked man shivering next to me in his jockstrap and harness in the cold evening fog gave me a wink. He flicked his wrist in the air, pantomiming the act of swinging a whip, and made a cracking sound.

"I saw you last year at Folsom," he said.

I am not delusional enough to believe for a moment that I'm remotely famous — let alone gay famous, or even kink gay famous. I will never win a porn award for hosting a 50-person gang bang with my face, nor will I make international headlines for poisoning my human pup with a lethal injection of silicone to his balls. But I have to admit there is enough dirt floating around the internet of me consensually doing horrible things to other people, videos I once believed, prior to the Trump presidency, would have prevented me from ever holding public office. I am confronted with these artifacts whenever random guys come up and recount watching me perform at local fetish events, whipping my friends until their backs resembled hamburger meat. They pull out their phones to show me photos they took at street fairs or circuit parties, flashing images of me crouching low to the ground to get a better aim at my partner's ass or gripping their hair to lean in for an encouraging kiss in the middle of our scene.

"You're hardcore!" they say. "So masculine!"

To which I think to myself, "Am I?"

An unfortunate byproduct of being a Dom is that people sometimes project you to be much more butch than you really are. Left with limited snapshots of someone's personality, we create mythology based upon how aggressive their kinks seem. I happen to know how to tie a few rope knots, but suddenly I'm expected to spend all my evenings rigging willing victims to

the ceiling as though I'm Spiderman. They hear I have a whip collection and think of broken skin and gnashing teeth, then morph me into some cartoon image of a Daddy living full-time in a dungeon filled with hooks on chains, flexing the muscles ballooning from my leather vest while smoking a cigar, even though I'm asthmatic and barely clears five feet of height.

I'm not so much masculine as I am masculine-passing—an accidental illusion of rugged dominance. Even while zipped into leather chaps with floggers in each hand, I feel less like a Tom of Finland character and more like Michelle Pfeiffer's Catwoman. Because the truth is: I would never be mis-taken for a hyper masculine Dom, if I hadn't been such a feminine kid.

Everything I know about wielding whips, arguably one of the harshest tools that can be used in BDSM, I learned from being a dancer. In high school, I wasn't just a dancer—I was the captain of the color guard team, a competitive performing arts activity that trained me in ballet and jazz and modern, that taught me how to twirl silk flags while doing pirouettes and stag leaps across the floor. I learned choreography full of chaîné turns in double-time to Stravinsky suites, dipping into pliés before throwing my wooden rifle into the air. That was me, caked with glittering stage makeup that would have embarrassed a Las Vegas hooker, striking a dramatic pose by dropping into the splits on the song's final note, my sweaty face dripping with mascara. Flaggot, the high school bullies called me.

They were right to call me that then, and they would be right to call me that now.

When I grip the rigid handle of a six-foot bullwhip in my hand, readying to target the sweet spot between my partner's shoulder blades, the teenager in me falls out. That dancing queen may have traded in spandex tights for a harness made of dead cow and metal buckles, but she still feels the kinetics in her bones. I measure the distance between me and my boy, calculating enough force to fly from my arm through the tip of my whip, enough to graze his skin, light licks at first, ramping up to screaming lashes, with the measured grace I once used to spin around with my flags. I'm dancing once again, this time with a submissive—we are dancing a dance together, on air, through painful peaks and sensual valleys, carried by adrenaline and intention.

I like to believe leather and drag are two sides of the same coin, that if you scratch a leatherman you'll find a drag queen underneath. In drag, a queen might amplify or pervert aspects of femininity for the sake of irony and entertainment. Giant wigs help achieve this, as does makeup to redraw the features of a person's face, along with prosthetic boobs. Leather is often the inversion of this, an exaggerated performance of masculinity for the sake of sex and eroticism, drawing upon macho imagery such as the rebel punk or disciplined military officer or road dog biker. So there's a thin line between inflating your crotch with a cockring and wearing hip pads wide enough to occupy different time zones.

A drag queen friend of mine once complained about his limited closet space: "I have to live with this whole other bitch's wardrobe just so I can become her," he said. It takes him hours to become his queen, to paint on her face before squeezing into her elaborate costumes, the

same amount of time it takes for me to black my boots and polish my gear and ready my toy bag. Because in this act of primping and preening, we're both participating in a shared ritual of transformation. Of putting on our armour. Strapped in my harness and chaps, I seem to stand taller, more confident and capable—a slutty superhero with powers ablazing—an archetype of fortitude others see in me I of-ten can't see myself.

When I gear up to kink out, I don't think I'm becoming "this whole other bitch" anymore than I'm becoming more of who I am. I believe we live a million personalities in our one single body, and they melt and marble together—that we play a clumsy game of dropping and juggling between each of them. I believe the timid little child who hid behind their mother's skirt on the first day of school still lives inside me, as does the teenage dancing queen just beginning to learn her strengths, as well as the confident Dom Daddy I'm growing into.

In the case of the latter, He's fun to play with, though sometimes I have to coax Him to the surface, give Him permission to breathe, to raise His own special form of hell. I like being Him, but just as with donning a sequin dress over a foam body suit, sharing His skin becomes exhausting over time. Which is why, at the end of a night of cruising and rough play, after I've given Him His fill, I'll cheerfully kick His heavy boots off my sore tired feet. I'll relieve my dick and balls of the metal cockring that had been pushing them past their limit for the last five hours, triumphantly declaring that I just removed my tuck, and become another version of myself again.