**BULL**

mage: Alon Braier

By Kathy Anderson

His father was now his mother but he was still an epic asshole.

“He won’t even let me get a tattoo,” Josh said. “He gets his whole dick cut off and he won’t even let me get a tattoo.”

Josh hated being forced to sit here at family therapy every week, the therapist and his parents waiting for him to miraculously be okay with the fact that his asshole father was now his asshole second mother or something. What a freak show.

“Call me Goat Boy,” Josh said. “From this day forth, my name is Goat Boy. If he can change from a man to a woman, from Joe to Heidi, then I can do the same. I am officially changing my name to Goat Boy and my gender to half goat, half boy.”

“I’m not paying good money for you to mutilate your body with tattoos like all the other losers,” Heidi said.

“But you can mutilate your body and we’re supposed to be all happy for you,” Josh said.

“We’re not here to talk about tattoos, Josh.” “Goat Boy.”

“There’s no such thing. But there is such a thing as a woman born into a man’s body. We’ve been through this. You’re fourteen, not some baby,” said Heidi. She patted and stroked her long hair as she talked.

He looks stupid patting his hair like that. He stinks at this. Josh pictured Ashlee in his Spanish class, the sexy way she tugged on her ponytail when she smiled at him. Now that was how a real girl handled her hair. He felt an immediate erection rise up and gathered his coat over his lap to cover it.

“Maa-maa. Maa-maa. Goat Boy is bleating,” Josh said.

“Knock it off, Josh,” said his mother, Sue Ann. “It’s not easy for me either but you don’t see me bleating.”

“Maa-maa, I was born into a goat body and you’ll just have to accept me as I am,” Josh said. “If I have to accept him as a she-male, he has to accept me as a goat boy. Maa-maa.”

“She-male is not an acceptable way to describe Heidi, Josh,” the therapist said.

“Josh is not an acceptable way to address Goat Boy,” Josh said. “Heidi is still the same person,” the therapist said. “I’d like you to try something, Josh. Just for a minute. Turn your whole body toward Heidi and look her right in the eyes.”

Josh turned his whole body to face his father. He looked him right in the eyes and held his gaze for a full minute, forcing himself to wait before he spoke.

He felt sick at what he saw. He wasn’t used to it at all, even though his father had started dressing like a woman months before his surgeries. It was still disgusting and wrong and ugly. His father had been a regular looking man, kind of nerdy, with square glasses and a normal dad haircut. He had been a skinny guy, clean-shaven always. He said he couldn’t stand the scruffy look that so many movie stars and singers had. *They look dirty with that stubble on their faces, he had said. Look at that bum, why would it be a fashion to look like a dirty bum.*

Now Josh saw the strangest man when he looked at his father. Puffy face. Long straight blonde hair. Red lipstick! Eyes ringed with brown eyeliner, fluttering long eyelashes. Contact lenses instead of glasses. He didn’t know how to dress like a woman. Nothing fit him right. His blouse was all bunchy and his skirt started way high above his waist and hung below his knees, like it belonged on an old nun. To Josh, he looked like he was in a cheap Halloween costume or like he was one of those gross female impersonator guys in the Philadelphia Mummers Parade strutting down the street with big red lips and a ruffled umbrella. He was a fake woman with fake breasts and a fake vagina and nothing would change that.

There was a family story about the first time Josh saw his dad’s penis, but Josh was too young to actually remember. He had heard his mom tell the story to girlfriends cackling around the kitchen table and to tipsy aunts at family parties. His dad had been trying to teach Josh to pee in the toilet while standing up. Toddler Josh looked at his dad’s penis, pointed to it, and said one of the few words he knew, “big.” Josh wished he didn’t have a picture of that story in his mind. He would give anything to be able to take a penknife to his brain and cut it away.

Josh saw an eager look on his dad’s face, like he was waiting to hear a compliment. Like he actually thought Josh would be one molecule of okay with this. Fuck that shit.

“Hey Dad, how are you doing in there? You can come out now. Admit it was all a crazy mistake. Take off the makeup and stockings, chop off that hair, stop taking hormones because that’s a losing battle. Hate to break it to you, Dad, but you still look like a dude. Your big feet and hands—dead giveaway. What are you going to do—chop them off too? I don’t think so. Period, end of story,” Josh said.

His dad looked away, his face reddening. Josh felt his heart thumping like a drummer was flailing wildly around on his rib cage. He wanted to ask his mother if she was going to stay married to this asshole. Did she even want to be married to a woman? She didn’t sign up for this. Poor Mom.

“Can we wrap this up?” Sue Ann said. “I’ve had about as much of this as I can take for one day.”

 “We have ten more minutes on the clock,” Heidi said.

“Un. Fucking. Believable. He wants to get his money’s worth,” Josh said.

“Why do you let him dominate these sessions?” Heidi said to the therapist. “It’s outrageous. Everything is not about him.”

“I said I’m done, Joe,” Sue Ann said. “I mean Heidi.” It was the same voice she used to order Josh and the farm animals around. No nonsense.

Josh loved when his mom cracked. When she called him Joe. When she said “my husband.” It meant he wasn’t the only one who looked at Heidi and still saw Joe in there.

\*

“I have my own money,” Josh said. “I’m getting a tattoo with my own money.”

In the front seat of the truck, his parents exchanged a look. It was too fast. He couldn’t tell what was going on up there.

“It’s not about the money,” Sue Ann said. “We don’t want you to do something you’ll be sorry about later in life.”

“Like you never did that.”

“Yeah, we did stupid shit, Josh,” Sue Ann said. “So we feel like that’s our job, to save you from doing stupid shit, all right? Enough. Get off it.”

Josh felt a rage so huge he wanted to pound his fists against the truck windows and break out of there like Superman, roar out into the corn fields and knock down everything in his path—barns, cows, fences, tractors—smash it all down.

“I hate you,” he cried. “You suck. I don’t know why I was even born. Do you know what kind of shit I have to endure every day of my life, having a she-male for a father? Do you know what happens to me at school every day? Anyone else would have blown their brains out by now. And all I ask is one thing. I want a fucking tattoo on my arm. And I am getting one, no matter what you say or do. If I have to go to an illegal place where they don’t ask for the stinking permission form because I’m underage, I will. And if I die from an infection because you made me go to a butcher tattoo shop, that’s fine. I’ll be better off dead anyway.”

His parents looked at each other again. They did that thing married people do, talk with their eyes. Josh hated when they did that. It wasn’t fair to send thoughts to each other instead of having to say them out loud so he could hear.

Finally Sue Ann said, “We said get off it, Josh.” But her voice wavered and Josh knew that meant his parents were weakening.

“All you care about is yourselves. You don’t even care what I go through. I have a right to my own life. I have a right to get a tattoo. It’s my body. Luke got a tattoo when he was eleven. Stevie got his first one when he was twelve and now he has like ten of them all over him. All my friends have tattoos. I’m the only one without one.” He wasn’t going to bring up Ashlee, who had a purple rose tattoo on her lower back and a pierced belly button.

“We’ll talk about it later,” Heidi said finally. She still drove like a guy, one arm draped over the top of the steering wheel.

“There is no later,” Josh said.

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Sue Ann said.

“I’m doing it this weekend. Or else.”

“You don’t speak to us like that,” Sue Ann said. “You don’t tell us what to do and when.” But she didn’t sound like herself. She sounded like a new mom, who was not quite sure of what she was supposed to say. His normal mom was a bellower. When she yelled at you, you moved. She got lots of practice yelling at the cows, who were good at getting out of the pasture and milling around in the middle of the road. When she yelled at the pigs, they jerked around and followed her.

“I’m not telling you what to do. I’m telling you what I’m going to do. This weekend.”

Everything Josh had said about school was a lie. His friends were great. They said the right thing when they heard about his dad. They said they were sorry. It was like a dad dying, wasn’t it? Like what you say to a guy whose dad dies. Sorry for your loss.

Just one guy gave him a hard time. Bernardo wanted to be a film-maker and he would not shut up about making a documentary about Joe/Heidi. Every time Josh saw Bernardo coming, he ran. He was sick of hearing how important the film project was, how it would go viral, how Josh would be famous for having a tranny dad. He hated the stupid questions Bernardo kept asking. *What exactly did they do with his dick after they cut it off? Does he keep it in a jar like my uncle’s kidney stones? Is he a lesbian now, because he’s still married to your mom? Bernardo said, Don’t you see, it’s like a story of America, here in lower Delaware, all these farms and shit, and there’s your dad, walking in a corn field with her long blond hair blowing in the wind, no city around him to protect him, nobody else like him.*

His friends said they would lean on Bernardo to shut him up, if Josh wanted. But Josh said no. He was trying to keep a low profile. If he got in trouble at school, those fucking family therapy sessions might go on forever.

\*

The tattoo guy was a girl. Josh didn’t expect that. She was covered with tattoos herself, her arms and legs a sea of colors and pictures. She looked like a cartoon that you wanted to read, with a story line that led you up one arm and down her back, down her leg and up her other arm.

She barely glanced at his forged permission form and didn’t even ask him for i.d. Josh could not believe his good luck. He actually thought they would throw him right out the front door and tell him to come back in a few years.

She didn’t look directly at him, but gestured for him to sit down in her chair and stood over him silently.

“I want a real big one,” he said. He pulled out a picture of a huge bull with red angry eyes and black flared nostrils. It was an intricate  beautiful design, with curly plumes of smoke coming out of the bull’s nose and his legs kicking up in the air. “On my right arm. Like I want his tail to end up in my armpit and the rest of him all over my whole arm. And when I move my arm, can it look like the bull is pawing on the ground?”

“Jesus Christ,” she said. “I knew it. I knew someone would ask for something really, really hard on my first day. I might as well quit right now. I’m sorry, man.” Her face scrunched up and her eyes filled with tears.

“Don’t be sorry. I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to ask for something hard,” Josh said.

“I don’t know what to do anymore. Everything I touch turns to total crap. I try so hard,” she cried.

Josh felt totally helpless. He didn’t know what to do or say to make her stop. He stood up.

“It’s okay. I don’t even need it. I can go,” Josh said.

“No. No. No,” she said. “I have to do this. I can’t keep fucking up my whole entire useless life.”

“Are you sure? I’m cool with not doing it. I swear,” Josh said. “Fake it till you make it. Fake it till you make it,” she chanted under her breath. Her hands shook as she groped for her tattoo gun. Josh turned around, reached out, and touched her hand with one finger. He was trying to settle her down, the way he laid his hands softly on the farm animals when they were scared. When it was time to inseminate the heifers, he was the one who stroked their backs to keep them calm and held the tail up in the air while his mom reached deep inside them to thread the insemination rod into the uterus and pump the bull semen in. He had the magic touch, his mom said.

The tattoo girl still didn’t look him in the eyes but she opened her palm and took his hand, breathing heavily like she was trying to catch her breath. She held on tight, like she was bobbing in choppy water and he was her lifeline.

He was so happy holding her hand. He had forgotten what happy felt like. It was like he just ate a warm, oozy brownie where the taste stayed in his mouth and filled him up everywhere. It was like waking up after a wonderful dream where a girl put her mouth right on his penis and her soft long hair fell all over his naked body. Wow.

The tattoo girl whispered, “You’re a good guy, you know that? Thanks for being so super nice to me.”

“It’s nothing. Everyone should always be nice to you all the time. Don’t even worry about it. You won’t be nervous forever. It’s only your first day,” Josh said.

“Come here, you,” she said, pulling him close. She hugged him so fiercely and for so long that he almost fainted with pleasure. She smelled so incredibly good. “Let’s try again. I think I’m ready now.” Josh smiled and sat down in her tattoo chair. He took off his shirt, hoping he didn’t smell of cows or sweat. She studied his picture, made a stencil of the bull, then wiped his arm and armpit with rubbing alcohol. The gentle way she swabbed him down and the feel of her hands on him were so wonderful that he had to stop himself from laughing out loud.

When the first stab of the needle in the tattoo gun landed under his armpit, Josh cried out in shock. It felt like the needle reached all the way to his bone, like she was stabbing him with a jagged knife, ripping him open. Was this normal? Or was he a baby who couldn’t stand a little pain?

She continued, panting a little and murmuring under her breath, like she was remembering the steps and repeating them to herself. She stabbed so hard and so fast, Josh couldn’t even find words to stop her. The pain paralyzed him. Finally his nose started gushing blood and he vomited and fainted almost at the exact same time. As he slid from the chair to the floor, he saw the air turn a gorgeous shimmering green all around him. *Isn’t that amazing, there’s all this green hidden under the air,*was his last thought before blacking out.

Someday he would tell his wife about the first woman who got under his skin. He would describe it all—the bull, the green cloud that enveloped him, the ink that remained under his armpit in a trail that went nowhere. How that was the moment he knew his childhood was over. He would tell his wife he was born into his manhood covered with blood and vomit and paralyzed by pain. Try having a baby claw its way out of you and then we’ll talk, she would say, laughing.

\*

When Josh woke up in the emergency room and saw two faces looming over him, his first thought was, *Who’s that lady with my mom?* Then he saw Heidi reach her long, hairy arm with her big man’s hands around his mom’s shoulder and he knew. He closed his eyes again, but he could feel her there, waiting.

*\*This story was published in: Bull and Other Stories by Kathy Anderson, Autumn House Press, 2016.*

*\*Copyright © 2016 by Kathy Anderson.*

\**Image: Alon Braier*

13