

Pat Mosel



Short story - Bull's Hit

ONE

Jackie Bull says that the man in black thinks he's king.

Tom Bull says that rings true.

The man in black has a big life-vest, all padded skin tacked neath his chest. He rolls his eyes when he looks at you, and floats.

They gloat.

Says who?

Say aye. Say you.

He knocks his knees when he goes downhill, but he doesn't know because there's flab down low. He walks to his car and inserts the key. There's a shudder in his brain for he thinks 'why me?' He wants the engine on and revving to go but his calves are aching and his feet are slow. Got to feed the child in the home of their own.

Not another moment to sit or to roam. He turns the key to left and pulls out the choke but the petrol does not pump and he resorts to a smoke. Let's see. Look at me. I'm the man in black with a beam in my eye. Why me? Say aye. That's a rear-view mirror that I'm looking in and the beam in my eye is growing dim. The light is fading and I can't go back. The looks on their faces are a kind of attack.

Daddee. Feed me.

The sun is setting and my car won't start. I'm on a country lane and it's hell as well. In the mirror turning, the beam grows less. Light of my eye, what a mess you've got me in.

Here I am. There I am.

page 1

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Pat Mosel



Then the view behind takes a different form. A miracle is working. He is departing from the norm. Come back, man in black.

Come back. See the sheep are grazing on either side of a narrow lane in the cold countryside.

The heart, man in black, takes the rap. They love you so, man in black. Take that. Give kiss. She yearns to rest her head on the shoulders she would miss. Don't go. Come back.

Look at that. The sheep are moving by and the moon is high. It's night. Quite right. She wants you home. Go on. Come back.

Now the car is running of its own freewill. Life is deflating as he slumps on the wheel. Take that. And that. Fight back. Wack, wack. No thanks, is what he thought as his head got caught. In the wheel, it was spinning as to burst his brain and the light in his eye was just pain, again.

The car wing mirrors flapped to a halt, briefcase landing by the safety belt. The more he sat the more real he felt. His world was warm and he gaining calm, rolled down his window, saying goodnight to the sheep in the field by the now dark lane. But they. Turned tail. Ran with fright. For the sheep to run was to shun the man in black for it got him raw. He could not ignore it but swelled up hot; took his tallest fingers and gave a rude, rash signal, meant to harm. What for, man in black? Why do that?

The bull standing by gave a snort to alarm; should it charge it might break his arm. Oh no, man in black. Not that.

The beast's eyes were churning and they burned right through the fingers that had done what they couldn't undo. Go back. Quick, quick, man in black. It won't do.

Says who? You too.

Pat Mosel



The bull thunders on. Watch out. The stout black beast crashes through the hedge, scattering sheep which go 'ba ba' for it's coming to get you in your car as you are. It was that nasty signal, among other things.

The man looked to left, and right, left, right. No wings flapping; the bull bathed in light. He took up his hand to turn the key. The engine started idling so he thought he was free. Put down his foot with a great surging glee. However, the bull was there and ramming his side, blow upon blow to the metal hide. He rocked to and fro while the bull gouged through, ripping and ranting 'til the car snapped in two.

Wham! Bang! Pow! He said.

Not you.

He lay in the field, groaning to himself. His eyes telling nothing 'til he felt his head. His fingers slipped up slowly and massaged what was lowly, discovering there... a crown. Not dead. Vest gone. Robe instead. Fur trimmings; smile brimming.

Long live the king.

TWO

The man in red won't sing for his supper; he sits right on and snaps for a cuppa. Do behave.

No fear.

My dear.

The time is long gone when a woman would fulfill the right and left of one man's drill.

Don't you see.

So be it.

I am a woman with a child at my skirt. Clean dirt. Squirt. Squirt.

Pat Mosel



I'll stay where I am and be true to you but I'll not bow and scrape as they used to do.

Just what is the good of a wife who's not keen to be queen when a king he reigneth every day. The world it twisteth every way. A ray of hope shone from the boy at his feet who had just turned three. Had his tea. Ate it all. Good boy. Clap, clap. Golden curls on the young tike's head, stars in the eyes that looked up at Dad.

Starry eyed.

Where to hide.

You play with me right now, this minute, said the lad, already past the limit. Look at me. I am three.

Can walk. Can talk.

You got a sweetie in that pocket of yours; me come up on your knee; I can drink from cups and straws; want to see... my sore... my picture; my friend has got a tractor. He gazed at Dad with a child's self-rapture. The image of the man he would grow to be. Sincerely, he believed in the man in red who looked over his head to the woman at the table. She was slim, she was spouse, but not quite suitable.

Hair's in a mess so I must get it done. Can't we have a little bit of fun? Go out. Dance about. Like it was, when we met. Years ago, it seems now.

Encouraged to remember, he could take a hint. Would not stint. He scooped up the form of the lad, his own, and together they went through to the phone. Directory. Satisfactory. He dialled, spoke out and reserved a table. Best local restaurant in a converted stable. Florist shop would, chop, chop, send a bunch of roses. Red and gold. Must be bold.

The lad said, 'Dad, watch this. I'm the king of the castle.' The child has clawed his way to the top of a chest of drawers. With his feet he is stamping, he is whirling, twirling,

Pat Mosel



buzzing, rubbing, chipping, thumping. Man in red, the king is dead. Boy has power. Boy chants, Dad shouts, 'Get down.'

He can't.

Your hour has come, man in red. King dead. Let go.

Life ebb.

Yet, anger knotted in the great man's breast and with one iron fist he beat his chest, the other hand lingering in his pocket. Stop it. Get down. Furrowed by the deepest frown, he held his breath to check his force and managed just in time to alter its course. Hard, at the wall, he let rip. Hit, biff. His knuckles burst in plaster, flakes of paint, the throbbing and blood brought him near to a faint. The boy curled up there in a ball. Cowering in fear. Let tears fall. Drip, drop. Then he yelled so loud that Mum came there to see what was happening to son and heir. What were you thinking? Poor thing. Look at him.

Nasty man. Wham! Wham!

Her husband's hand was turning blue.

Damage to the wall was a surface scratch but she stared at it with the eyes of a cat. I'll plaster that, she spat. What hurt even more was the boy's slight grin and rigid refusal to counterance him. Golden curls now buried in mother's neck.

What the heck. It is done.

Blood in pool. Drip, drop.

Cottonwool. A glass and a pill.

No pill. He shook his head. Rather go downhill. My son. Look what. I've found. Sweeties in the pocket of my jacket, just for you. Sweets of rainbow hue. Keep them father; the boy turned him down. Mother led him off to bed.

Pat Mosel



The man poured a dram. Felt it warm his heart, his hopes and home. What do I do with a boy like you and a wife like that, he thought as he swilled, downstairs, hearing soft her song.

God bless. You too, Mummy.

She came back to him in gentler frame. She'd left her son with milk and a book. Tucked up. In bed. Sleepy head.

A trace of bitter in her pitying look. This man took her youth. Left her here. No one near. The grand ideas they had started with, upside down with the falling pound. Scrub, scrub. Not enough. Make do. Want away. You can pay another day. She put her hand on the shoulder that the bull had rammed; looked down, balding crown. Rubbed his cheek, began to nuzzle, stroke and soothe, 'til they fitted together like a jigsaw puzzle.

The pain in his head, shoulder and knuckle, eased to the touch of this woman and the muddle of his thoughts, the fears, the din of the world that must take is cut from him withdrew from the being of the man now blue. They fell on the carpet like beasts in a field, her legs parted showing she would yield to the one thing that during the whole of the day he had kept in the background, had held at bay. Roused, they were one with body and mind; with hills, bills and pills; with kitch and kin, with light and night, with son and... lover he was in... heaven. Together they lost and gained, took and gave.

They would have gone for more but a knocking at the door had them scrabbling for their clothes. Do you suppose... it was the flowers. That's it. Time's passed. Tiddly Bull with the seven roses he had ordered for her on the phone before he had lost his cool and they had come together in pleasure and in pain.

Thanks. Tiddly Bull wanted money in her paw, payment at the door. He went to get it but his wallet had flitted. Face turning puce, sweat on forehead. What the duce. This was

Pat Mosel



horrid. It must be somewhere for it couldn't walk like this. She hissed. Not now, you fool. He's cold blue.

She's numb. She dreads the explanation.

Seven red, none gold, roses. Ordered by himself. Paid for by myself. Smelled by myself. Cut and arranged by myself. I am by myself. Love is paid for dearly.

I will make it up to you. Dinner for two, waiter at the table. Cheque account will balance if able. Here's what's in store: dine in former stable... delicacies and fantasies... a treat she'll adore.

However. The roses are closed. Her voice is shrill and her look is chill. Paid dearly. Already. She shrivels him. Now she's on about the clothes she hasn't got and the work he hasn't done and the bills he hasn't paid and the life she gave him and... and, and... a babysitter. Sometimes he could hit her.

Roses are red.

She's blue too.

ONE, TWO

Whirly girlie, hair's now curly. Dressed in blue; nothing new. Shave and part; must look smart. Cloth-covered buttons; waist pulled together. He kneels before her with a sprig of heather. Tickle, giggle; revive that wriggle. Tie fans down to his belly'o. Click of the heels; we must go. Wheels crunch over the entrance to the Vine Leaf Restaurant.

Madam and Sir, good evening. The staff is beavering to make each night, happy and bright. Let's see. Goodie. Wine divine and food we care for. This is just what we're here for.

page 7

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Pat Mosel



Correction. Chef's dejection. We've run out of prawns. Doesn't matter. Paté is better. Nothing must spoil this evening of ours. Secretly she presses the heather on her blouse.

Leaves on the menu, leaves on the wall, under the eaves and on the stable door. Vines are climbing the candelabra. The table legs and each chair. Flame and leaves, far and near.

The Vine Leaf Restaurant beams on the murmur of the wine and diners which tells how fine it is, when... in burst the Bull relations. Heads turn. Faces burn. To sit and to look. A hand shook. The couple in blue with the squirming, fidgeting clock-watching, throat-clearing, staring, scratching flock... sustains shock. The bleat suspended while the crowd takes stock; To the rescue restaurateur, suppressing a twitch. Goodness me. Table for three.

Jackie Bull is here. Joan his old bride. And... have you seen her? It's Tomasina.

Beauty gone awry. The buzz must fly.

Say aye.

Sigh.

For Tom Bull, he-man has changed into she-man. Oh, he has not been fixed. He is still yet betwixt. The crowd is shaken to witness he has taken a brazen step like this.

Wig for hair. Jewels on fingers and on each ear. Dangle. Jangle. Lethal nails. Rampant make-up. Flashing lashes. Fuming perfume. Long-slain handbag. 'She' tottered as on bottles to where monsieur had pulled back a chair.

Jackie Bull and Joan sat down with 'her'. Feeling right twits. They'd had a fit. Tom Bull had blown it, betraying the style of Bulls who liked to lord it over rank and file. Joan Bull bunched towards her plate, from the nape of her neck resembling vine and grape.

Pat Mosel



Jackie Bull, crossed with a frown, quickened the pace of his reckless conversation. Must we own? This relation?

The woman in blue heaved a sigh of relief. Here was aggression in recession. Briefly flattered that Tomasina had adopted woman's wiles, had dumped machismo with all its trials. The man in blue turned a deeper shade for the glow of the evening was beginning to fade. It was rum. He felt glum. If he couldn't be a king and they weren't proud of man who had been like a bull since time began...

Know you, this creature Tom had slandered him, told all and sundry he presumed to be king. The boy and the woman had knocked that out of him, though they still made him wear that metaphorical old hat with the narrow brim. Suits the assertive, breadwinner him. Pay up. Belt up. Bottle up the worry. Say sorry. Over turn. Turn over a new leaf. Be one she can cherish – mild and rich. He went outside to stem the tide of resentment coming in. Slim chance he could cling to any small thing. In the night air he jeered, vowed to grow a beard. Fight or flight. Both out. No clout.

Left...

Tomasina has rejected man, dressed like a woman, defied the plan of heaven and tradition. Agitation. His wife's elation bothered him.

Right...

The snub to manhood had raised his blood. This was bull. It would come to no good.

Then, from way up high the Heavenly Guide took mercy, made him look to one side. There in the dark under cover of a tree was a big black shape grazing contentedly. It was all that was needed to toss his mood; what was conceded was the importance of food.

Like us.

Says who?

Pat Mosel



Say aye. Say you.

He went back in, vowing not to say a word. Best not to think or let your thoughts be heard.

The woman, his wife, was waiting for him. Not bad at all, if a little prim. Hand in hand, they stood united. Ate their food and paid the bill. Made Tomasina not feel slighted. Our multi-coloured couple dared people to gape; afterall mankind descends from...

The fingers fitted – so they put the pieces together.