

B U T C H

By Alan Bennett Ilagan

My boyfriend is butch. That is to say, he has the qualities traditionally (and stereotypically) attributed to “macho” men. A few of these traits are as follows: an interest in cars and automobiles bordering on a sick obsession, a propensity for uttering phrases like “I feel like I’ve been ridden hard and put away wet”, and a general disdain for any and all fashion that goes beyond T-shirts and jeans. He doesn’t know the first thing about home decorating, Broadway musicals, or accessorizing (which is, in my humble opinion, the one thing that separates us from the animals).

Even his rose growing and gardening is done in a masculine way. He saunters outside in his typical outfit of jeans and a sweatshirt, and he prunes with sure, firm cuts. His eradication of aphids and black-spot is a thing of military precision and gruffness. In other words, you’d think he was a straight guy ~ deep voice, manly gait, and all things man-like.

I am decidedly not butch. Compared to him I am everything but an actual girl. I have society’s idea of femininity down to a science, batting eyelashes included. I am often just one small step (and one decent wig) away from being a woman ~ again, only in comparison to him. Okay, so this is an exaggeration of sorts. In truth, I can be pretty butch myself, although my recent construction boots/tight jeans/flannel shirt look is actually a nod to Madonna’s “Don’t Tell Me” video and cowboy-punk look. A flaming queen I am not – not usually. There are moments of royal fabulousness, and I am extremely susceptible to robes with feathers and fringe, but when I walk into the supermarket one would never suspect such monstrosities.

Such a stance makes me a rather average person in the gay world, much to the chagrin of my feather-ruffling tendencies. Gay guys like me are a dime a dozen. We define the word “gay”. Guys like my boyfriend are a precious rarity, not to mention a much-desired commodity. “Butch boys” have always enjoyed such popularity. The very essence of being a gay man means that one is attracted to other men, not women, and so

the ideal male is one of extremely “masculine” attributes: a deep, coarse voice ~ a strong, well-defined, muscular body ~ and an inability to co-ordinate colors.

The majority of gay men who are single are looking for “straight acting” gays. It is listed on all of their on-line profiles and magazine personal ads. “Straight acting” is also what they mean by “frat boy” or “Abercrombie and Fitch guy” ~ it’s a label for the stereotypical red-blooded All-American Male. But what exactly constitutes today’s American Man in a world where sensitivity and machismo battle for political correctness?

I’ve always contended that gay men today are straight men ten or fifteen years from now. We’ve always been on the cutting edge ~ the front-running fringe element that straight men eventually come around to, give or take a decade. Look at the gay male earring craze of the seventies: it was taken up by the straight boys in the eighties and nineties. The same can be said for body piercings and, most recently (and tragically), Capri pants.

A recent New York Magazine cover story asked the question, “Are Men the New Women?” and featured a naked man admiring his image in a hand-held mirror. Gay men have excelled at vanity for years, pouring time, money, and hard work into our appearance. Our heterosexual counterparts, ever-behind the curve, are finally catching up.

Suddenly, male vanity is running rampant though the breeding world. Gym memberships and at-home workout stations are on the rise as men work toward their Statue-of-David ideals. The beefy matinee idols of yesteryear ~ Arnold Schwarzenegger, Sylvester Stallone, and Bruce Willis ~ have undergone a transformation to leaner, more svelte cuts of meat ~ Brad Pitt, Leonardo DiCaprio, and Ben Affleck. The trend has seen men scrambling to lose those love handles and tone their muscles. It is a pronounced shift felt most acutely in the superficial fashion world.

Baggy, boxy business suits have given way to slimmer, form-fitting styles. Roomy, forgiving, pleated pants have been replaced by their merciless plain-front cousins. Contoured cuts and body-conscious fits are the standard for most of the big-wig designers, the ones who are setting tomorrow’s trends.

Where once was a head of unkempt towel-dried hair is now a meticulously-maintained coif of fussy follicles, held in place by a growing array of hair-styling

products. Companies like Polo and Clinique now offer extensive lines of hair and skin products geared specifically toward men. Such concern with personal up-keep has been a mainstay of the gay male community since the days of Oscar Wilde.

So while gay men strive for a throwback to the macho-men of the past, straight men look to their gay brothers for their image tomorrow. We always seem to want what is just beyond our grasp. Then again, this is true regardless of sexual orientation. “Butch”, “masculine”, and “straight acting” are only labels. My boyfriend is more than a simple macho man ~ he’s a human being.

He may be the butch one, but I’m the guy who sits on the couch watching television while he does the cooking and cleaning. He dries roses while I am, in his succinct words, “a total slob.” He does the laundry as I lie around in my underwear. Neither one of us acts out a completely “male” or “female” role in our relationship. Do not ask us who is the “man” and who is the “woman” ~ we are much more than that.

In spite of this, my boyfriend is still considered the more manly, butch one, while I am seen as the nelly, queer one. In this hetero-centric world, he’s the guy and I’m the girl. It makes us more palatable as a couple, and if this is the first step to acceptance, then so be it ~ I’ll be the girl. (And I say that with a wink and a smile, because I know what really goes on in our bedroom.)