

# Straw Dogs



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*Heaven and Earth are not partial. They do not kill living things out of cruelty or give them birth out of kindness. We do the same when we make straw dogs to use in sacrifices. We dress them up and put them on the altar, but not because we love them. And when the ceremony is over, we throw them into the street, but not because we hate them.*

-Su Zhe

You begin to develop a headache, perhaps from the hard fluorescent light reflecting off the professor's receding hairline, or maybe it's just a symptom of the struggle to reconcile what had been normal, what still seems normal, with the situation in class. *Political Science 326: Race and Ethnicity Politics in the US*, an accepted course to fulfill the college's social justice requirement. Your advisor assured you that it was a quick class, a sure fire 'A' that you might as well knock out since you've only got fourteen credits lined up the last term of your freshman year. All you had to do was just parrot back what the professor says in lecture. So you signed on, showed up, and now you're sitting in the first row of the lecture hall, listening to the professor pontificate with a passion that would have made the Reverend back home blush.

“—And the police have killed 5,000 Americans since 9/11. 5,000! That's more than soldiers have died in Iraq. That's more than all the

terrorist attacks in the last two decades. The police are at war with the American people, with people of color, who bear the brunt of their brutality. Do you know why this is?" The professor pauses for a moment, withdraws a rag from his shirt pocket, and wipes the sweat from his forehead. He takes in a deep breath, and steps right back into the flow of his lecture. He clicked a button on the remote in his hands, and the projector threw an image on the board, the seal of the Department of Defense. "The police have been infiltrated by killers from the military, who patrol our streets the same way that they patrolled Iraq and Afghanistan, with an utter disregard for human rights, or life! They hire these psychologically broken people, and they give them assault rifles." He clicked the remote again. The next slide was a police officer standing with an AR-15 slung, hanging lazily by his waist. "They give them tanks!" The next slide was a jet black MRAP with sheriff markings on its flanks. "They give them drones!" A predator gleamed in the sun with Air Force decals on the next slide. "They give them the weapons of war and set them loose to occupy our cities, these men who have been conditioned to oppress people of color overseas. We need to push back. We need to stop the militarization of our police force. We need them to stop using the weapons of war on our streets. We need them to stop hiring soldiers who don't know any problem that can't be solved by pulling a trigger." The professor turned off the projector and looks up at his audience, satisfied with his performance.

He turns to you. "So, Buford, would you like to share your perspective on the militarization of the police with the class?"

He means the black perspective, as if you were some ambassador for every male person of color, or POC, as he called them, by dint of your presence on the overwhelmingly white campus. You're just an acronym to him. You've never been an acronym before. You've dealt with a lot of them, but they were always things, concepts, ideas. Perhaps that's all you

are anymore, a concept, an ephemeral ideal that people would rather work with than the reality of a human being.

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“You’ve gotta be fuckin’ kidding me!” you spat as the pickup truck behind you flipped on its light bar, dancing blue rays across the side view mirror. “Goddamn it, pull over here, Haines.” You told your driver. The private followed your instructions, bringing the Humvee to a stop. The military police’s pickup truck followed you, pulling in behind. The once white vehicle was now caked in the fine dust that permeates the Iraqi desert, rendering it the color of a frappuchino that had been left untended for too long, whipped cream, caramel, and coffee all melted together in a blotchy, unappetizing amalgam.

You pulled the radio handset from the dash, and keyed the mic. “2-2 Alpha, this is 2-2 Bravo. Over.”

The radio crackled static for a second. “*Bravo, this is Alpha, go ahead. Over.*”

“We’re gonna be late to the alpha alpha. Over.”

“*Why’s that? Over.*”

“The Po-Po’s just fishhooked us. Over.”

“*Fucking MPs. Get here ASAP, Bravo. I’ll let the Lieutenant know, maybe he can bring some heat. Over.*” Your squad leader sounded bemused. You imagined him laughing at the absurdity of the situation.

“Wilco. 2-2 Bravo, out.” You put the hand mic back in place and watched the MP make the slow walk from his truck to yours. He’d clearly lived inside the wire long enough to become completely domesticated. The fresh bodies always wear their body armor and carry rifles at first, maximum firepower, after all, it’s a war out here, keeping dirty soldiers out of the chow hall. But eventually, they get tired of the weight of it all, of how heavy the armor is, the rifle is, the kit is, the war is, and they let it all go a few months in. They metamorphose from the FNG into the

domesticated fobbit, and this one was fully mature, having lost all the trappings of a combat soldier beyond the coloration, carrying nothing beyond an M9 fit snugly into their FOB bra, and the burden of their overinflated sense of importance.

Haines slid the window down, a small slab of glass, several inches thick, as the MP peered into the Humvee, his eyes obscured by jet black Oakleys; not ballistic rated, but they sure looked cool, or they would have, if the sand hadn't scoured them to the point where you aren't sure how he can see through those lenses. The handset for his radio was clasped to his chest, obscuring his rank insignia.

"Do you know what the speed limit is here?" the MP asked.

"Twenty-five," Haines said.

"And do you know how fast you were going?" The interrogation continued, a bizarre reflection of a conversation that you've had yourself a few times back stateside.

"Actually no, the speedometer's not working." Haines replied.

"You shouldn't be driving a vehicle without a working speedometer," the MP said.

"Yeah, well, I'll tell Uncle Sam to get right on that."

"I don't like your attitude, private." The MP stood up, unclipped the mic and spoke something into it. You could see his rank insignia for a moment, the single chevron of a buck private. Then he clipped the mic back on, and picked back up where he left off.

"You were going twenty-seven miles an hour. It's unsafe to drive in excess of the speed limit here—"

"—Hey! Private!" you shouted. "Maybe we drove a little fast, but we're in a hurry—"

"—Do not mistake my rank for my authority, Sergeant Jackson," the MP growled, cutting you off. He wasn't old enough to drink, wouldn't be for a few years, and the way his youthful voice cracked halfway through

his declaration undermined the heft that he wanted to give it. He was baby Simba, practicing his roar, so that one day he'd be a real lion. He turned back to Haines. "Private Haines, I'm giving you a ticket for exceeding the speed limit—"

"—You're giving my soldier a ticket? Are you fucking kidding me?" You were incredulous. You looked at him as if he were a different species, and now you realized that he was looking at you the same way a small town cop looks at drivers with out of state plates, a free ticket.

"Not only that, sergeant, but you're not wearing a reflective belt inside the wire, putting you in violation of FOB Warhorse's standing operating procedures. So here's one for you as well. Have a nice day." He handed the two sheets of paper through the window. He added one last barb. "To the limit, sergeant."

You looked at the ticket, the thing that reminded you most of home in the last month. An absurd mockery of the familiar, a fine to be paid in filled sandbags, and imaginary points on a license that the Army handed out like candy. This is what we had brought with us. America in a circus mirror.

"What are we going to do about those, sergeant?" Haines asked.

"Fuck 'em. We're going outside the wire for two weeks. If that marshmallow wants to hunt us down over some fucking sandbags, then he can come find us. If he can remember where he left his armor."

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The class stares at you as you chew over your answer, ruminating upon the gap between what you need to say, and what you want to say. More kids, more marshmallows, with the Stay-Puft Marshmallow Man running the show. Don't cross the streams, you don't know what might happen. Stick to the concept, the soft, harmless thing that can't possibly hurt anyone.

"I can't say that I'm a fan of the Military Police," you say.

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Stephanie fancies herself a problem solver. Any problem falls within her domain; even the ones that no one else actually thought were issues, those are her specialty. It was something you found out soon after you began dating, when she took it upon herself to rearrange your refrigerator so that the milk would keep longer. Never mind the fact that you've never actually had a quart of milk go bad on you before you could finish it, and now you have to dig past a veritable wall of condiments to reach it, thanks to Steph, you have the extra two days that you never wanted.

She loves fixing people problems most of all. She brags all the time about how she got Amy and Cathy to bury the hatchet, and now they're besties, and how she went out and got Claudio, patron saint of the perpetually single, together with Mimi. She trucks no drama in her social circle, a utopia where everyone moves in perfect harmony, held in orbit by the irresistible force of her personality.

"I met this guy in my philosophy class," she begins. "His name's Ricky."

"Really?"

"Yeah, he's super interesting. He's just a freshman, like you, but he did a bunch of volunteer work in Africa after high school, so he's about your age." She said. "He invited me to a party he's having tonight. You should come; I know you'd have so much in common."

"I don't know," you say.

"Trust me, baby." She leans over the back of the recliner to kiss your forehead. Her ebony curls drape down to tickle your face, and you are warm and happy in this moment.

"Alright, let's go,"

Ricky lives in a house in Madison Valley, a long walk, or short drive away. You opt for the long walk. Steph likes walking with you. She clutches your arm, leans into you, and breathes you in. She says it makes

her feel safe. You keep scanning the streets, lingering over the asphalt patches, garbage cans, and culverts; your heart speeds up a little each time you see one, but she can't hear it through your heavy coat. It keeps the cold out, and keeps her at just the right distance.

Laughter can be heard long before the house comes into sight. The streets are pretty much empty by 22:00 in this neighborhood, once you get away from Madison Street. You duck underneath a low hanging tree branch, and then Steph leads you up the steps, dragging you along like an unwilling puppy into a veterinarian's clinic.

"Hi, I'm Stephanie," she tells the guy who's sitting next to a cooler full of beer. "Ricky said I should come, we're in the same philosophy 201 course."

"Oh, alright," he said. "Ricky's not in right now. He's walking some friends over from Cap Hill." He kicks the cooler. "Grab a beer, make yourself comfortable."

Steph glimpses a girl from her class in the kitchen and bolts to make girl talk, leaving you by yourself in the living room with a few strangers arranged in their own cliques, laughing and complaining about the kinds of things that college kids always do: girls, classes, and beer. You grasp onto the third issue, pulling a can from the cooler, wrenching the pull tab until it pops and you can smell the yeast and hops in the air. You drink deeply from the can before settling into the sofa, waiting for something to capture your interest.

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Misery had snuck up and clubbed you in the back of the head. Your stomach torqued itself into a knot as you began to lose equilibrium. A stagger to the right sent you towards the gutter as the screw in your gut spun once more, starting the chain reaction of bile, acid, and half-digested fish washing its way up your esophagus. The side of the street was an open sewer, a collection of all the blood, trash, and filth accumulated over the

past week, left to ferment in the sun. The odor became stronger as you let your rifle fall slack in its sling, doubled over in painful spasms. You heaved, once, twice, and finally added a torrent of vomit to the stagnant runoff. The world twisted, swimming in the vapors, and your foot slipped into the vile stream. It soaked through your pants, through your boots and socks, and wended its way over the blistered skin of your feet.

Allen grabbed you by the strap of your armor, and kept you from pitching face first into the sewage. He reeled you onto the pavement. Your right foot squished as you tried planting your weight on it, and it suddenly seemed like a good idea to sit down. Another round of puke accompanied your impact, landing mostly in your lap.

“Whoa, whoa,” he began to seeth, “Godammitt, Jackson, what the fuck did you do?”

Thinking had become a challenge. “I don’t know, Allen,” you protested. “That hajji chick a block back offered some food, so I had some.”

“What’d she give you?”

“It was some fish. Overcooked. Too soft,” you muttered.

“You fucking idiot,” Allen cursed. “Did you fall asleep during the briefings?”

“I didn’t drink the water.”

“No shit, but what’s in the fucking water?”

“Fish shit in it.”

“Sure, close enough,” Allen said. “You’ve got yourself some quality Iraqi gutrot right there. I’m gonna go grab Doc Avery, see if he can do anything for you right now.”

Allen jogged off, leaving you sitting in the middle of the street, praying for death, and acutely aware of the eyes of everyone watching you pay the price for your poor judgment.

Time passes. One can. Another. A bottle of something dark and bitter. People come in, and people leave. You start to feel warm from the drinks, not yet drunk, but gone enough to be maudlin. Steph pops back out of the kitchen, the scent of something harder than beer on her lips. She was always a sucker for tequila.

“He’s here,” she whispered. “Come meet him.”

Ricky’s holding court in the kitchen, lord of his domain. Not quite a king, but certainly a baron, at the bare minimum. He mentions he’s thirsty, and someone hands him a drink. He says something funny, and everyone laughs. He says something that isn’t, and everyone nods their heads sagely. He wears thick rimmed glasses, and no one questions why there are no lenses in them.

“Hey, Ricky,” Steph says. “This is my boyfriend, Bo.” She leans in behind you, presenting you for his approval.

“Bo, huh?” he asks. “What’s that short for?”

“Buford.”

“Odd name, Bo. Stephanie’s been telling me a lot about you. You were in the Army?”

“Yeah.”

“You ever kill anyone?”

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The bullets hissed as they passed by your ears on their way to digging divots out of the pavement. The squad charged towards the house where gunmen fired upon you from the second floor. Hall and Haines fell in behind you to the right of the door, Williams to the left. Hall thumped you in the back, signaling that they’re ready to breach. You stared at the door. The door was your whole world. Home, that godforsaken country, those assholes shooting at you, they didn’t exist. There was nothing but that door.

“Go!” you shouted to Williams, who stepped forward and planted his boot squarely over the deadbolt. The doorframe splintered, but didn’t give, and Williams was already turning to get out of your way. He jabbed his leg back, mule-like, shaking the door once more. The frame split, and the door drifted open a hair, a tiny look into the world beyond. You rushed in, shoving the door aside.

There was a man waiting for you. He had a rifle in his hands and his god’s name on his lips. But you were faster, and you pulled the trigger, again, and again, and again. The insurgent dropped to the ground, his rifle clattered alongside him. The rest of your team charged in behind you, followed by the rest of the squad, who pushed past and up the stairs to clear the shooter on the second floor. More gunshots sounded out above you, and then there was silence. You looked down at the man who would have shot you, his blood pooled out of him through the many holes that shouldn’t have been there. It crawled outward slowly.

Sergeant Allen came down from upstairs. He was breathing hard, and he leaned in next to you. “Good shot, Jackson.”

You watched the blood begin to seep into the leather of your boot. “You alright, Jackson?” Allen asked. “C’mon, talk to me, sergeant.”

The leather, once bleached bone white, was now irrevocably stained.

“Bo, man, talk to me. Talk to me.” Allen pleaded.

“I’ll be alright, sergeant. I just needed a second.” You stepped away from the precipice of the spreading blood stain.

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Booze tinged blood pulses hot in your veins. This question again.

“Yeah, I have,” you admit.

Ricky looks you over, and then dismisses you with a backhanded wave. “You don’t get to talk to me, Rambo,” he said. “Stephanie, I’ll never understand what you see in a heartless killer like that.”

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You've assembled a suit for your job interview the same way an eagle assembles its nest, a piece from here, a piece from there, until you've got something that passes muster. The shirt came from your dress blues, which you hadn't worn since you got out of the army, almost two years and twenty pounds ago. It still fits, barely, trapping you inside it like a sausage skin, stretched taut over your arms and torso. The tie is a matte black affair, another refugee from your previous life, fumbled and twisted, four in hand, into a constant annoyance. Combined with a black sport coat and slacks found on the discount rack at JC Penny's, you've made yourself look presentable.

The HR lady looks at your resume, judging it, mulling it over as she sucks on her bleached white teeth. "So, Mr. Jackson, you're applying for the career management job?"

"Yes, ma'am." Politesse comes easy for you, the Army didn't need to beat the *yes, ma'am* and *no, sir* into your head at basic, your mother did it for them, as most Louisiana mothers are prone to do.

"You are aware that there's a security position open as well?" she asks.

"Yes, ma'am."

"And you didn't apply for it?" She peaks an eyebrow.

"No, ma'am," you say.

"It seems like it'd be more up your alley."

"I'd rather not carry a gun at work," you say.

"Pity, it looks like you've got plenty of experience at that." She sighs.

"Well, what draws you to Duwamish?"

"I'm working my way through college, got tuition and such covered, but I'm stretched a little thin, so I'm looking for some summer work to make up the shortfall for when class isn't in session."

“Good, good. We love helping students here.” She looks you over. “The job will have some physical requirements, lifting twenty pounds, yadda, yadda, yadda. I don’t think that will be a problem.”

“Where do you see yourself in five years?” she asks.

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Your ears popped again as the plane made its final decent. The 767 was packed from stem to stern with soldiers, each one wearing their “going home” uniform, the one clean uniform that they managed to keep sequestered from the grime, sweat, and blood of the deployment. You shivered, the plane’s climate control was set to what most people would consider normal, but after fifteen months in Iraq, you regretted not wearing your snivel gear when the temperature dropped below eighty.

“What are you going to do when you get home, sergeant?” Hall asks. He doesn’t look at you when he says it. He’s too busy staring out the window, hoping for a glimpse of the familiar, a touch of home to keep him level until he could get the real thing.

You had a plan. A meticulous plan, already partially set in motion.

“I’m gonna cook myself some blackened redfish. I’ve already ordered the fillet from back home, wild caught, they’re gonna fly it in for my first day of leave. Some garlic, onions, cayenne, paprika, butter it, dust it, cook it until it’s got just a little bit of char on each side. Then I’m gonna take my time to eat it. I’m gonna take all day. That fish is the only thing I care about.”

“Shut up, you’re making me hungry,” Hall joked.

The plane landed, thumped the landing strip once, and then coasted as the engines whined to slow them down.

“Y’see, the char’s the secret. Anyone can make food that tastes good, hell, an MRE tastes almost edible as long as you don’t actually look at it, or chew it for too long. But texture, the feel of it in your mouth, that’s the trick to great cuisine.”

“I wish I could have something like that,” Hall said. “I’m going to be stuck in the barracks shuffle, new assignments, grabbing all my shit from storage, it’s going to be a week before I get leave and can actually do something.”

“Perks of stripes,” you mutter.

“I think I’ll call Sgt. Allen, see how his recovery’s doing,” Hall said.

“Last I heard from his girl was that he was conscious, speaking again, but not out of bed yet.” You thought back to the blast that sent your friend back to the states months ago. The blast that he was on the wrong side of the Stryker from, and you were on the right. Ere but for the flip of a coin...

The plane comes to a halt, and the fasten seatbelts light turns off. A cheer erupts from the soldiers, an echo of the jubilation of landing in Kuwait. Eighteen hours of limbo, no longer at war, but not yet home, had tempered their excitement with exhaustion and boredom and a new uncertainty.

“They’re giving him the Silver Star,” Hall said, as he pulled his bag from the overhead.

“He earned it.” You said over your shoulder as you shuffled towards the nose of the plane.

The men shuffled up the boarding ramp, their excitement to be back kept in check by the confining space until it erupted up into the terminal. They pushed forward, a pack of smiles and laughter, until they made it past the TSA checkpoint that kept people without tickets away. The concourse was decorated in American flags, and even in the early morning, there were strangers waiting to welcome you with applause and adulation. A man grabs your hand, gripping it firmly as he pulls you in for a hug. Grey hair escapes from underneath his Vietnam Veteran’s cap.

“Welcome home, sergeant,” he said. “Welcome home.”

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“I’d like to have graduated, and opened up a restaurant,” you explain to her.

“Huh.” She scribbles something into her notepad. “I don’t think you have the experience we’re looking for in administrative work. We’ll keep your application on file for ninety days.” She uses her sweetest, let-him-down-easy voice. “But I’m sure if you apply for the security job, you’ll have a good shot at it. They’re pretty good about working around college schedules. Just promise you won’t go crazy like all the other vets.”

You suck in a breath, but it feels like the air isn’t making it to your lungs. You loosen your tie, lurch out of the chair, and head for the door. “Thanks,” you say, not looking back.

Over your shoulder you hear it. “Oh, thank you for your service, Mr. Jackson!”

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The June mornings still carry the damp legacy of the spring, chilly enough to prompt you to wear your jacket as you make your rounds around the perimeter of the Duwamish chemical facility. Most of the ground you cover is wooded, a natural buffer held away from the sensitive workings of the plant. Just as you did in Iraq, you pull security, walk your post from flank to flank, scanning the eight foot chain link fence for signs of tampering. It’s tedious work, retracing your steps again and again, marching past the same scenery that never changes, beyond the rustle of the trees as the wind blows, and the occasional animal seeking fresh foraging. But it’s nice to be away from the other workers, who ask the same oblivious questions about your past, dredging up thoughts and memories better left to lie.

“*Hey Bo, you better come see this,*” another guard calls on the radio. It’s Brandon, the worst of the bunch. Brandon, who insists that he would have joined the service, but he knew that he would have punched the drill sergeant in the face the first time he got yelled at. (He wouldn’t have.)

Brandon, who attempts to bond with you over shared experiences, you, who went to war, and he, who played *Call of Duty* all through his senior year of high school. (They're nothing alike.) Brandon, who constantly jokes that his taxes pay your salary. (Not anymore, they don't.)

"What's going on?" you ask.

*"Just come check this out, something breached the fence. I'm at the northwest corner,"* he insists.

You pick up the pace, jogging along the fence towards his location. He's waiting for you, decked out in Tac Tailor gear that seemed excessive to fight a war with, much less conduct security patrols.

"Bo, take a look at this!" he shouts.

The fence has collapsed, caving inward. A four point, black-tail buck, with the velvet still on his antlers, bleats and tries to stand. His hooves scrape at the ground, finding purchase for a moment, before the buck collapses back into its viscera, the intestines still hooked onto the top of the fence, telling the sad story of a buck that couldn't quite make the leap, the transition, from the outside world to this demi-sanctuary.

"Check it out, man," Brandon says. "You can totally see his guts and stuff." He takes a picture of the dying animal. The flash spooks it, and it makes another unsuccessful attempt to flee. He laughs.

"So, what are you going to do about it?" you ask.

"Take a picture, report the damage, go home," he states.

"You're just going to leave it here?"

"What do you care? It's not in your sector."

"It's suffering."

"It's just a deer," he retorts. The deer's blood pours out, seeping into the cracks in the ground as it spread. Brandon steps to the side of one crimson rivulet. "Besides, I don't want to get my uniform dirty, dry cleaning's expensive." He pivots on his heel and goes back to his route, leaving you and the deer behind.

You kneel down next to the animal. Its blood leeches into the fabric of your trousers, hot against your skin. You can see pain, fear, and panic written across its eyes as they roll wildly, looking for the threat that they can't comprehend, that they never saw coming.

You never met a valkyrie. There was no ferryman that you could bribe with two bits of copper to guide you from your old life to where you needed to go. You are still adrift, treading water in the Styx, with no guidance from higher.

You grasp the deer's antler, and the animal's thrashing slows to the occasional twitch as its sides still heave for air. It stops looking for its invisible assailant. It has found you. You slide the Glock from its holster, and press the muzzle against the deer's head, about where you imagine its temple would be. It has to be close; you can't aim through the growing haze of tears. The pistol has no external safety, no lever or button to push to arm its killing potential, there's only the trigger.

"I'm sorry," you whisper.

The cold barrel heats in an instant, and gives the creature a copper jacketed fragment at twelve-hundred feet per second. The deer stops struggling for breath, stops twitching, stops everything. The hole is neat, hard to notice unless you were looking for it, nine millimeters wide and ringed by a thin layer of scorched fur. It casts nothing out to divulge its location.

Brandon runs back, having heard the report. He comes upon you, stained with blood, holstering the sidearm, everything he had hoped and imagined you to be. He looks at you with awe.

"Holy fuck. That was some cold blooded killer shit right there, Bo."