

STRAW MEN

There once were two men made completely of straw, who lived in a bungalow by the hill we grew up on. Because their lungs were made of straw, and their tongues and mouths were made of straw, they could not speak. They could not eat or drink, and they could not procreate. But in every other respect, they were like everybody else.

Their eyes were black buttons that could see well enough. And having no ears, they could hear well enough. The men had no names, as they needed no names. They spent their days working the land and dreaming of the world.

At night they lay where the stars lit their hands, and they read and passed notes to each other. They guessed at the turns their favorite heroes would take, and would play to see who would figure the endings first.

On sunlit days when the mules had got tired, the men would dance on the grass and in fields, their bodies singing as the cool air passed through. And in winter, invariably, they would pack themselves of snow, and wait by the road for a traveler to mistake them.

Long ago, there were others whom the straw men called kin. One brother was caught in a rainstorm like this, and had melted to pieces and drifted downstream. There, the children found him in parts, and for days hid beneath islands of him, lunging out to scare and impress their friends as they dove for trinkets they would trade amongst themselves.

Another brother had gone to the city one spring with a satchel of clementines to sell at fair price. But as he walked in those lonely woods, a flock of crows descended onto his threads, making nests of him, nettling the treetops as the wind carried parts off. Finding only the harvest they grew, ever since, the remaining brothers have kept always in eyesight of the other.

Their origin was disputed, although some believed the men were once scarecrows so good at their jobs they'd been rewarded with life. Others believed they'd risen from the field where a battle once waged, instilled with the souls of unclaimed bodies. Truth be told, the men remembered no childhood, and having no heirlooms or gifts from the past, who were they to say? As far as they knew, life had always been this—doing as people do, with all the intelligence that could be bestowed, as well as the affections.

Spring came one morning with the purple bloom that ran the bank, and the warm East winds that carried salt on the manes of meandering dandelions. Through the woods the brothers walked, and peered into the caves where brown bears budged, and the nests of the bluebirds by the sycamores that grew gnarled with wisdom and the lives they had witnessed.

Along the trail back, the brothers stopped still at the spot where lightning had hit a tree the year before, turning its heart black—and the spot where two lovers once rested, drawing poems on each other's bodies beneath what the brothers believed to be the last cherry tree on Earth.

That day, the brothers returned just before nightfall, their feet covered in thistles and thorns. As they sat on the porch and watched the sun set, and one picked small insects off the other's straw hat, they spotted three women walking out from the road. Single file they emerged until they stood along the riverbank, where the brothers then saw they were three perfect Matryoshka dolls, exact duplicates of the other, except only of their proportions and dispositions.

The sisters wore plain dresses made of burgundy silk, and shawls of embellished threads that tickled their toes. The first two held lanterns made of cerulean glass. And the brothers marveled at the strength of the smallest, who carried the others' luggage on her back.

As the companies met on the stout river bridge, the brothers recalled a promise they'd made,

which they quickly forgot.

Now in those days it was known that men made of straw could not speak, so the tallest of the women wasted no time:

“Hello,” she began, as one once did in situations like this. “My name is Masha, and these are my sisters.” The sisters curtsied to the brothers, and being gentlemen, the straw men bowed their heads.

“We come from the city of Priyana, through the caravan route in the mountain pass. We travel to the coastal city, to the markets where the world’s merchants trade.”

Just then she saw a distant glimmering, and puffing her amber shawl around her cheeks, forgot where she left off.

“And my name is Anya,” said the second sister, who stepped eagerly in front and curtsied again for good measure. “We’ve been sent to seek husbands. But bless we find shelter and full stomachs instead.”

When at last the smallest sister said nothing, the eldest thought to mention that she was mute from sadness. Accepting this, the straw men bowed once more, and taking no coin for their troubles, led their guests across the bank.

Although the men did not cook, having no stomachs for food, they knew perfectly well how. From the cupboard the eldest took a jar full of grains, which they kept for guests, and mixed in some water and cinnamon for cold porridge. Outside, the youngest sister sat quietly on the portico, counting the species of moths round the lanterns’ glass.

Sitting farther from the light, the youngest brother held up an astronomer’s manual and, occasionally flipping the pages, learned several facts.

He learned, for example, that up close this sister was much different from the others. Her eyes were two colors, one blue and one gray. And unlike the others, her hair was the hazel of summer’s first barley, and sewn with an undiscovered auburn. She had bruises on her neck, which she tried to cover up. And while one nostril whistled, the other one flared. He learned that she was often nervous, and would chew on her nails until the cuticles bled. But these were facts one could easily observe. And when the sister closed her eyes at length, and started to bite on her lip and leave marks, the brother believed with all his heart that she was pretending to be invisible. And as time slowed on the crumbling portico, and the moths fought voraciously over the waning heat, the sister would beam in bits and spurts, and for the first time seemed not to care so much that she wasn’t invisible after all.

The straw man then realized he had been found out, and damning his pageantry, tried now to act aloof. He buried his eyes until he’d flipped past the final page, of which he’d read none.

The moment came when the lanterns puffed out, and hundreds of antennae began buzzing with excitement. Not understanding what he saw, the straw man set his book down. Soon he too was counting the species of moths, some spotted and some striped, some furry and some lean, as they covered the sister’s simple silk dress. For what seemed hours, she whispered tender breaths across their wings. And for the first time, the straw man felt unafraid of fire.

As the two sat together in the dark, overhead, the planets conspired to budge. But they never did.

When her sadness had all but vanished, the sister finally spoke. And being bewildered, the straw man could never recall the exact words. But as he remembered them, they went something like this:

“If you wish to know me, I will say what I can. I am the third Sister Matryoshka. I have no name but to say that my parents at one time called me something different than the others. But since they have long since died, and one has little use for a girl as small as me, I have forgotten my

name. If I could find a name, I would give it with all the speed these lips allow. But as I have none, I hope this will suffice.”

And heading inside, the youngest sister kissed the straw man’s cheek—at which time the brother fell quickly in love and vowed to himself two things. One, he would find the sister’s missing name. And two, he would find a tongue with which to speak that name, and thus earn her affections.

That night the brother dreamt in colors he had never seen. And half in dream the sound emerged of a thousand beating wings—or slapping hands—and the image in the muddy field of a blue comet rising.

This burning man, with wings of light, ran clear through the alleys of slapping hands. And falling into the bank, a gust of steam rose up. Brother no more, the straw man knew it was time to run.

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When at last the drunken singing passed, the straw man found he was high up in a maple tree. He carefully removed a blue jay’s nest from the top of his head, and he whistled down the stalk.

Staring down the field at length, he wondered where his house had gone. But then he remembered. And he next wondered how he’d gotten up in that tree.

For weeks he thought he was past the commotion, but a band of men had followed him. Some had pitchforks and some had torches. He ran until he came to a farm, and hid in a mound of hay for three days.

On the fourth day he shook out some ants from his torso, and apologized to their young winged queen. He took from a scarecrow a large hooded cape, and draping it over his shoulders, walked in the direction of some menacing stone tower.

Another four days passed, and on the road he met a soldier whose arms were nearly falling off. He carried too much. So he offered to the straw man his sword, which was a lovely old sword that was covered in rust that gave it character. And nodding in peace, the soldier went on his way.

The next morning, he heard the sounds of chatter in the nearby woods, and pulled the sword out and hid behind a caravan along the path. Two men came out, a third between them. They laughed and made jokes. And they dropped the body and rolled it under the caravan.

One threw up a coin purse and the other caught it. They continued joking and laughing until they were beyond a big boulder and out of sight.

The straw man inspected the body, which he found to be warm, so he pulled the man out and placed him in the caravan, and nursed him for two weeks until he could walk. The man was so grateful, but he had nothing to give. They soon became friends, and the straw man escorted the man home.

There were olive groves and patios and open spaces for children to play. There were stables filled with horses, and next to the house – which was the largest the straw man had ever seen – was a much smaller house that from afar looked empty.

Coming upon the property, the traveler could not contain himself. He called out one word – just one – in succession. Again and again he called, until the front door – which was taller than the straw man’s house once was – flung wide open. From behind came a woman so horrid that the straw man could barely look at her. But the German could not contain himself, and neither could she. Their love was tangible. It wiped away all things mortal and plain. They swung each other around three times at least, then the German’s wife called out, and a tiny blonde child came over,

and ran to her father and embraced him as her mother did. The air smelled of mulled wine and wheat and the ocean.

The family reunited, the straw man thought to be on his way. There was much work to do, after all. But the German would have none of it, and insisted his guest stay for dinner.

Being a gentleman, he could not refuse. He followed the family inside and sat at the table as they caught up with each other. And then noticed in the corner of the room some stacks of paper, atop which was a drawing of three women, identical in every way except of their proportions.

The German explained, as best he could, that he was a lawman and his business was to search for criminals. These women had committed a horrible crime, but with his child present he would not say. In his heart, the straw man knew this could not be true—for the youngest at least, whose heart was pure. He tried throughout dinner to smile and nod, but his thoughts were consumed by the woman he loved.

Later, in the study, the lawman explained that the sisters were charged with murdering their father, a great wealthy duke who was loved by many. They were wanted for treason, and for some minor crimes that paled in comparison. But they were now thought dead, in a house fire many miles away that happened over a month ago.

The straw man decided at last he would speak – so he gestured for a pencil and something to write with. For minutes he wrote without stop, and for many more minutes the lawman read what he had written. He then folded the sheet carefully in half, and in half one more time, and placed it by the picture of the sisters – the straw man expected as evidence – and without another word, walked the straw man to the hut next door, where there was a bed all made up for him.

It was a beautiful day, but the straw man could not say why. There was something crisp that reminded him of his brother and the times they spent dancing, and instinctively he reached a hand out behind him for his brother to grasp, but of course he never did. The straw man quickly saw the lawman emerge from the house, followed by his wife who was very upset. The lawman was throwing a bag over his shoulder, and was now wearing a lawman's hat and had by his side the sword the straw man had given him. He kissed his angry wife – and she was so angry she nearly didn't accept it – and he jumped on one horse and gestured for the straw man to jump on the other. He did so, and together they rode five days in search of the sisters, although the straw man did not know what would become of them, if they ever did find them.