Strawman

Lee Shaw

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Simone de Beauvoir once said, “Men and women are not born, they are made.” Yet if you were to ask every man on Earth what makes a man, you would receive a billion different answers. We are told to “man up.” We are told to “be a man.” We are told to “grow a pair.” Maybe we tell ourselves these things. Yet despite the supposed strength and certainty attributed to masculinity, we are all just grasping at straws.

Papaw is seventy-five years old. But his wrinkles don’t sag, they crash, like waves onto white sand beaches. There is a celestial energy in the folds of his face, a sun-shaded moon cratered by fistfights in Texas and shrapnel in Vietnam. He wears a hat almost always but removes it when he comes inside, revealing a twisted halo of wisping white hair around his head, an unkempt nest of feather and fiber roosted atop the crystalline surface of a tranquil pond. When he laughs, the cotton birds flap their wings and threaten to fly away. The still world shatters around him and folds into the water he will never drink as lesser creatures scurry away. His glasses are styled with an aviator frame that serves as a reminder to all that he surveys that he is – and always has been – a hunk.

The waitress giggles as she brings him the straw that was absent when she had first brought him his lemonade. She never would have thought to bring him one, a man with the wingspan of death and fists like artillery shells, but fingers that hold paint brushes and water colors; a man who would have led barbarian kingdoms in another life, another time, and like Ariovistus or Vercingetorix, would have spat in the face of Caesar long before he drowned in politics. He would lead the Vandals into Tunisia, the Macedonians into India, all in the name of country and glory and companionship. They would sing songs of him for millennia, name their sons after him. He also wears “dress” crocks, which are just brown crocks, but I have to hand it to him, they always go with whatever he is wearing, most likely because the ensemble was chosen by Momaw.

“What do you mean it wasn’t *really* a knife fight?” I asked.

Momaw brushed some lint from Papaw’s crimson button-up shirt and smirked.

“Like with anythin’,” Papaw replied between sips of lemonade. “There are degrees to everything. You see, back then, in Dalhart, in the fifties, early sixties, the town was divided. West of the train tracks is where the Mexicans lived, and east of the train tracks is where us white boys lived. We’d load up ten of us in a truck and cross them train tracks and fuck with ‘em. Make some racket. Whatever. They’d do the same to us. Hard to say who started it.”

Momaw shook her head.

“And well, there was this one Mexican. Leo Vasquez. We had been fighting since we were old enough to make fists. I had heard through the grapevine that he had half a mind to slice me up a bit. I knew that he’d bring some pissy little thing, a switch blade or somethin’. And I knew he knew that I’d be at that La Rita Theater some Friday night, ‘cause we all were. Nothin’ else better to do. So before I left, I took the cleaver from mama’s kitchen and stuck the blade down the back of my pants. I hid the handle behind my leather jacket. But know boy, I had no intention of getting into a knife fight. That night, when I went to the bathroom, Leo Vasquez burst in and pulled out his switchblade. He said, ‘Markham, you ready for a knife fight?’ which I always thought was a weird thing to say. *I see the knife, dumbass.* Anyway, I answered, ‘Yea, come get me then,’ and I pulled out the cleaver. Boy, I’ve never seen somebody high-tail it like that.”

He took another sip of lemonade.

“We had fun.”

He chuckled to himself, and Momaw and my voices joined the rancor. The cotton birds on Papaw’s head hovered above their nest.

Papaw grew up in a small town in the Texas panhandle called Dalhart. Less than five square miles and home to no more than several thousand people in the sixties, when Papaw drove us through it on our road trip to Yellowstone, it was difficult to appreciate. I set aside my vanilla coke and half-eaten package of Hostess snowballs and half-expected to see greasers flipping switchblades in the streets, high school girls smoking cigarettes in long, pink skirts, and cops eating donuts stacked on their black batons. A town out of time. In reality, I saw what I thought was just a suburb, complete with mud red pavement reminiscent of the dust bowl.

I lived in Grand Prairie, a city of over 150,000 people, which I thought was small compared to Dallas or Fort Worth. But Dalhart, with its population of less than 8,000 when I visited in the late 2000s, confused my metropolitan mind. We passed the courthouse where a bronze sculpture of James R. Fox Jr. sat, who had flown critical supplies over the Hump Route to a Chinese-US coalition during WWII. The People’s Republic of China made and presented the statue to the small town of Dalhart in 2002 – fifty-nine years after his death. We passed by the long-abandoned spot where the Super Dog Drive-In had sheltered Papaw in between raids, now just cobwebbed steel beams and rusted glass. Or maybe it had been bulldozed long ago. Perhaps I so wished to see it that I conjured up its industrial corpse. Momaw later found the recipe for the Super Dog corn dogs that Papaw had eaten in leather jackets, but in the one time Papaw ever criticized Momaw’s cooking, he said they did not taste the same.

We drove past his old high school, which was one block from his childhood home. Papaw had driven his hard-top Pontiac to school every day because he knew the girls liked it. We drove down the red pavement of Main Street, where Papaw had “dragged Main” every weekday night. “Everyone who was anyone was there,” Papaw would say. “I mean, we didn’t hunt, ‘cause Daddy told us not to kill anythin’ that wasn’t hurtin’ us. We didn’t do drugs, there were none to be had. We had nothin’ to protest about. We went to movies, we dragged Main, we got into some fights, we went on dates, and we plowed the fields. That’s that story.”

We drove over the railroad tracks; the rumbling of our tires shook my skull. Papaw became silent. I wondered if the sound rang out like a war horn to him, or if his skull was shaken too. But the tour lasted only minutes before we forsook red pavement for grey highway that was but a varicose vein separating endless fields from one another. From above, Dalhart looked like a tiny blackhead in the midst of thousands and thousands of fields and crop circles composing the face of a farmer, stained green from years of wading through oceans of grass. Papaw slammed the petal as we left the blemish of civilization among the flat green pores of the Texas panhandle. Highway patrol pulled us over soon after. He got a ticket.

“My poor daddy,” Papaw said, his hands absorbing the sweat of his lemonade.

“In the summers, I would drive a tractor out in daddy’s fields. We’d get up real early and go all day. Wasn’t hard work or nothin’. Just work that had to be done. Problem was, I would always be out real late the night before. Maybe I had a date or maybe I was dickin’ around with the guys. But I would always get back in around two or three in the morning.”

“That doesn’t sound like you at all,” Momaw snickered.

“Well, Daddy wasn’t having it one bit. He told me that we had to get up early to go into the fields and he wanted me back no later than midnight the day before. So the next day, of course, I came back in at three in the morning like usual. I walked up on the porch and suddenly I felt myself slammed down in one of the rocking chairs we had there. And I heard Daddy’s voice sayin’, “Charles Markham, I’m pretty damn sure I told you when to be home this evenin’. And he was holding one of his cowboy boots like a club, with the pointed heel lookin’ me in the eye. My daddy was the most gentle man I ever knew. The only person I ever saw him snap on was me. Boy, he raised that boot ‘bove his head and I thought this was it, but a white arm shot out of the dark and grabbed Daddy’s arm. And I heard my mama saying, well, not my mama. My step-mother. ‘Cause mama died when I was real young.”

The waitress brought another lemonade. Papaw transferred his straw and she took the empty glass.

“Anyway, she coaxed daddy out of it. He dropped the boot and said, ‘You better be back here by midnight.’

Papaw sipped lemonade through a smile.

And you better believe I came back by midnight. At least for about a week or two.” He laughed, but the birds only rustled. “That poor man.”

Momaw fiddled with the lemon in her unsweet iced tea. “You sure did put that man through his paces.”

Papaw fiddled with the ruby stoned class ring on his finger, large as a .50 caliber casing.

“You know, I sure did. I remember this one time, I was driving down the road pretty late at night with a bunch of my buddies, who were all on choppers. I had just gotten a new muffler on my bike but the choppers all revved up when we were underneath this underpass and it sounded like a damn artillery strike. This old cop tried to pull us over, but all the choppers scattered. I was the only one he got. We called him Red Rooster. He had freckles and red hair; you know the type. He had me rev up my bike and knew it wasn’t me who was breaking any rules. So he told me that he’d put me in jail if I didn’t tell him who was ridin’ the choppers. And of course, I knew who they were. They were my best pals. I told him, ‘Go ahead. Put me in jail. My daddy will get me out in no time.’ Rooster sure did turn the brightest red I’ve ever seen. He let me go. That was one of the rare nights daddy did not have to bail me out from jail.”

Papaw giggled a bit, but the birds had roosted.

“I mean, I ended up in jail a few times. I totaled more cars and bikes before I was eighteen than I’ve probably owned since. But what really got my daddy was when I went to join the Navy.”

Papaw’s black “dysfunctional army veteran” hat sat atop the booth next to him like an ancient monolith.

“I was a junior in high school I think.” He continued. “My only real concern in high school was maintaining a C-average, but I wanted to join the Navy. It was the in-thing to do then, ya know. Several of my friends had already done it. “Join the Navy and see the world” sounded pretty damn good to me. There were no wars going on then, 1958 I’d say. I went to a doctor in Dalhart, got a physical, and came back to brag to my daddy that I had enlisted. Now Daddy dropped out of school at seventh grade. He worked hard, he went on to seed the panhandle, help kill off the Dust Bowl, but it seemed like his one regret was missing out on that education. So he wanted all his kids to go to college, or finish high school at the very least. So once I told him I had enlisted, he called up that doctor and convinced him that I had crippling asthma. So the Navy rejected my application. I had no choice but to finish high school. And then I went to college like my brother Don. That’s that story.”

“How’d you end up in the army?” I asked, a straw having spontaneously appeared in my glass of water.

“Well at West Texas State,” he replied. “Being in the ROTC was mandatory for your first two years. My first year I wasn’t too gung-ho about it or anythin’, but over time I got really involved; I joined the drill team and the Special Forces division. There were no wars going on really. There was the Cuban Missile Crisis. But we stayed, graduated as officers. But when I tried to join the army, they found that old physical saying I was a severe asthmatic. So I had to have daddy call up that doctor and have him write a letter saying I had outgrown the asthma.”

Papaw stirred his lemonade with his straw.

“Daddy sure did get me with that one,” he said.

Papaw looked at Momaw’s grin and back at my face, convulsed and tired from laughing. A deep, guttural laugh burst from inside him and he wiped his eyes from behind his aviator frames. The birds took flight and circled the room. Either everyone was smiling or we were smiling enough for everyone.

“You give your daddy some shit too, boy, but he’s pretty lucky to have you,” Papaw said through an ivory grin.

If my Papaw is a hurricane, then my dad is a seawall, quiet and purposeful in his strength. On the rare occasion that the two bump heads, bureaucrats pick up their phones.

My dad is fifty-three years old, but the only indicators of his age are the dusting of grey in his hair, like ice on interwoven black brambles in the winter, and the twinges of salt throughout his sparse black beard. His eyes are blue, the blue that burns at the base of the spiraling tendrils of citrus and passionfruit that make up campfires – the yellow embers of the dashed dividing lines that characterize his two-hour drives two and from work forever burned into his pupils. When he is excited, the blue flame becomes a boiling spring, or maybe the room turns blue as the fire leaks from behind his pupils. It is hard to tell. Whenever we go to a restaurant, dad orders water and promptly removes the straw if he happens to find one in his glass. He might order a Shiner Bock as well, but he will drink it slowly – he might not even finish it – and it will be the only alcohol he drinks that week. He’d much rather consume his calories as ice cream and only ice cream. His shoulders are as broad as a fence post is tall, and his arms are as wide and deep as a freshly-dug post hole. He doesn’t work out so much anymore – these vestigial limbs are tattoos of times long past, from his days in construction and his days breaking boards and ribs. I have seen him throw the entire third row of seats from a Chevy Suburban over his shoulder. I have seen him single-handedly pull a boat from the black mud characteristic of a Texas rainstorm. He has cried in front of me only once, when his father died, but he did not cry at the funeral and calmly advised my six year old self to stop walking on the graves. I thought they were little hills. He calls my sister and me both “sugar bear” and we both call him “padre.” I have seen him take apart a car, an engine, a fence, an entire house, and put them all back together with ease as ACDC’s “Back in Black” plays in his head. He has also made me bookshelves for my growing collection and made my sister a display case in the shape of her initials for her glass figurines. On the weekends, he mows the yard twice because he hates piles of grass clippings and he smokes meats and potatoes. He is often silent because he is always learning. Always deducing. Plato would have called him a philosopher king, a humble genius. Like Marcus Aurelius, he could kill a man with his bare hands but would rather sit at home writing treatises, an emperor with the modesty of a rear guard. He would have designed siege equipment but cautioned against its use, would have erected palisades and unbreachable walls, and unlike Archimedes, when the Romans came for him, his circles would not have been disturbed. History would not remember him, but everyone who met him would keep his memory like a pillar of virtue in their minds. He would have it no other way.

“You know edge trimmers?” Dad asked.

“Like weed whackers?” I reply. “Sure, I know ‘em.”

A glass of water sits in front of me. Our wet straws rest motionless on the table as Dad sips his water. Mom sits next to him, smiling and administrative, her red lipstick branded on the straw jutting from her glass of unsweet tea.

“Well, when I was a young man, we mowed our lawn with a lawn mower, but we didn’t have an edge trimmer. Nobody did. So what Papete would have me do was take a hoe and run the length of the lawn, making sure to cut away the excess grass. We were the only house on our street who did it. But that’s how Papete was. Our house wasn’t the nicest around, but it was the most well-taken after. More often than not, I’d have to go out and pick up the trash and leaves that blew into our yard from our neighbors. And of course, back then there were no fences. So all sorts of crap became my responsibility, because I was the oldest.”

“You didn’t have fences back then?” I asked.

Our waitress passed us by, despite Dad’s waving hand. He had forgotten to order his beer. He sighed.

“Well, if you had a ranch or something, that’s a whole ‘nother deal,” he replied. “We kept chickens, we raised some goats every once in a while, so we had little chicken wire fences for them, but the people were free-roam. But I mean, Huckleberry Lane, the road that cut through Impact, it was just a dirt road until I was in high school. There was dust in our house just about always. Your Nana would just be sweeping it out by the pound. The City of Abilene would come by every once in a while and grate the dirt, sometimes water it down. But when I was in high school Abilene paved it over – every household had to pay a bit for it. Money was always tight but it meant your Nana could stop fighting the wind every day.”

“Did you work outside with Papete every day after you would get home from school?” I asked.

“Oh yea that was expected,” he answered. “Of course there was your Uncle Jacky, but I was the oldest. But that’s how I got to spend time with my dad. He was always working. It wasn’t fun but it was something. Your Aunt Tina is another story. She didn’t get called out into the sun with us much. I guess she helped Nana with the dust.”

The thought of manual labor made Dad’s blue eyes glimmer – or maybe fade.

Dad grew up in a small, unincorporated territory called Impact, Texas, which rested its tired head in the lap of Abilene, one of the larger cities in West Texas. Impact was and is composed of Huckleberry Lane, fifty or so homes, a Pinky’s Liquor Store, and “city hall,” a building where the leadership of the population of a few hundred at most would meet. Mom lovingly called it “Nowhere, Texas.” Perhaps ironically, the town of Impact does not have much of an impact. I like to think whoever named Impact had a good sense of humor. As the legend goes, the bank repossessed Dad’s childhood home after Nana and Papete failed to pay their taxes and tore it down in the mid-1990s. All of Dad’s childhood toys and clothes and memories came down with the roof. When Dad returned from Louisiana with my mother and her PHD and me, just a baby, the house was nothing more than dust and a few bricks stacked around the two mesquite trees Dad had climbed as a child. He took one of those bricks and never went back. There was nothing left to go back to. He went to community college and got his associate’s degree. He became an engineer. To this day he sends money to his siblings and Nana. It’s what Papete would have done.

“Sure, money was tight.” Dad said. “Your Nana started working as a cafeteria lady at our elementary school and she cleaned houses. And of course your Papete worked on those giant pieces of heavy equipment – he worked for International back then – you know, land movers and the like. But we were a handy bunch. We weren’t on Abilene’s sewage system. We dug our own. We didn’t rely on Abilene’s water – we had dug our own well. Really teaches you to appreciate things. But that’s just kind of how it was. I grew up in Papete’s childhood home – he bought it from my grandma and grandpa Shaw. Nana’s childhood home wasn’t more than a couple hundred yards away. They grew up together. That was the draw of Impact, I guess, families had compounds and supported each other. Nana’s parents, my grandma and grandpa Hindman helped us out when they could. But then again, back then you had kids to help out, you know? We were expected to work and help the family.”

“See – you and your sister have it pretty good, don’t you?” My mom smiled.

“It wasn’t bad or anything,” Dad said. “I lived the Tom Sawyer life, really. We swam in the stock tanks when they got full. We went down to Elm Creek when the banks were overflowing, but we called it Cat’s Claw Creek and we swam there and dreamed about inner tubes. Everyone was pretty poor in Impact except the Higgins – we always swore that they probably had an inner tube. We snuck through the forest of mesquite trees at night between our house and a motor lodge and we might swim there, see what people had left around. I guess we swam a lot. Back then nobody was worried about getting abducted or kidnapped. So we would leave in the morning and come back at night with no problem. We were just out there with the trees.

Maybe Dad’s eyes dulled for a moment – dashed yellow traded for a forgotten dirt road. Or maybe they lit up, every dividing line striking him at once. It was hard to tell.

“Maybe it wasn’t bad but it sure wasn’t great either,” Mom said. “There wasn’t a lot for you there.”

“Sure, I got bullied,” Dad said. “Kids chased me home pretty regularly. There were a couple of Mexican gangs operating in town that I learned pretty quickly to avoid. And of course, back then they didn’t know about ADD or anything like that. I thought I was an idiot. The special classes I went to sure didn’t help me out socially. I played baseball a lot and I liked it, but I had no intention of playing baseball professionally – I just thought maybe I could get a scholarship. I just wanted out of high school bad and I knew college wasn’t really an option. It was military or work. But my Uncle Freddy hired me on as an electrician and solved that problem. And that’s what I was for a while.”

Dad waved towards a passing waitress, but she passed all the same. His eyes burn. Or maybe they fade.

“Would you have gone into the military if you hadn’t been hired on as an electrician?” I asked.

“I never really considered it too much,” Dad answered. “Your Uncle Jacky signed up for the army so he could marry Aunt Amy – her family wanted him to have a steady job, source of income. You know, it was your Uncle Jacky who got me started in Tae Kwon do. He wanted me to come with him to the studio in Abilene. We did it together for a while, but Jacky left for the army – I kept going.”

“That’s how your Dad and I met,” Mom grinned. “One of my students was doing a presentation on martial arts and had your daddy come in to do an exhibition. He was sick and it was his birthday, but I guess he made an impression.”

“Yep,” Dad smiled back. “Tae Kwon Do gave me a lot.”

“It also nearly killed you.” Mom replied.

“It didn’t nearly kill me,” Dad said. “In ’86, I competed and won a tournament and I became a grand champion, but later that year I threw my back out and had partial paralysis. But Tae Kwon Do was being considered as an additional Class A sport for the ’88 Olympics. So I got back to training. I did the wiring for my instructor’s new studio. I was training really hard and working as an electrician. I was teaching classes at the studio so I didn’t have to pay when I practiced there, maybe 6 days a week for six hours at a time. Then the stock market crashed and I was out of work. I just kept training. But I was only eating rice and ketchup and I eventually got this internal infection that kept me down for a while.”

The waitress passed again. The blue of his eyes shone like a spotlight on her pale face.

“Partial paralysis. Internal infection. Pretty casual.” Mom mused.

“Well, after that, my instructor recommended me for a study with the US Olympic committee. We did a bunch of research on what would actually constitute a “point” when Tae Kwon Do became an Olympic sport. I did video editing for it, some demonstrations, whatever I could do.”

“But then he met me and had to focus on *fighting* for me.” Mom laughed.

“And let me tell you,” Dad said through a grin. “Even a second-degree black belt could not have trained me for that.”

Our laughter caught the attention of our waitress – or maybe the blue spotlight had finally found her eyes.

“You need something?” she asked.

“Don’t worry about it,” Dad announced, his blue eyes full to bursting. “I have ice cream at home.”

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It is a Friday night. We arrive at our favorite chain Mexican restaurant a little after seven and are seated at a large Camelot table as the booths are overflowing with people. Papaw orders a lemonade. Dad asks for water. They sit next to each other and discuss the problems Papaw is having with his sprinkler system, how the Cowboys are playing, how the Rangers are playing. Papaw sips the lemonade through his straw; the cotton birds begin to sing as the sugar blitzes through his body. Dad carries his glass to his lips; the clear fluid becomes blue as it nears his face. I do not notice my sister’s hands, or Mom’s or Momaw’s. But Dad’s hands, with his hardened knuckles and scoured fingers only leap above the table when he takes a sip, movement driven by necessity like a buck in the fall. Meanwhile, Papaw’s hands, massive and scarred, are never not on display above the table, always in view like a tank among rice fields. I sit with my left hand still on my lap, as if I were attempting to float it on water. My right hand lies spread-eagle on my placemat like a forgotten corpse.

My right pointer finger gingerly nudges a straw lying quietly in its wrapper. I look back and forth between my Dad and Papaw. I roll the straw between my fingers. I stare at them as if they would become mirrors at my gaze. Papaw has said he could never paint anything as beautifully as I write. He’s wrong. Dad says he will never be as smart as I am. He’s wrong. We’re all grasping at straws.

I realize that they are both looking at me as closely as I am watching them. We smile.

“He’s always deducing,’” Papaw says.

“Always looking for trouble more like,” Dad replies.

The waitress comes back around. I push the straw away.   
 “I’ll take a margarita,” I say.

“Sounds pretty good boy, I’ll take a Dos Equis Amber.” Papaw exclaims.

“Tell you what, I’ll have a Shiner Bock.” Dad adds.

“So no ice cream tonight, Daddy?” my sister asks.

“I’ll always have room for ice cream.” Dad replies.

Papaw begins to laugh and our voices join and grow until they become a symphony of cotton birds dyed with dark blue shades swirling about the room. The marimba and maracas leaking from the speakers fade under the weight of our voices. The waitress brings our new drinks. Papaw brings his bottle to his mouth, Dad does the same, and I drink my margarita through a straw.

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