

The Ballad of Billy the Kid

Today was going to be the day.

Will knew this as soon as his battered old clock radio started playing The Boomtown Rats at 6.00am. He didn't actually need to be up that early to go to school, but today was a big day as he had to get ready for his Year 9 presentation at assembly. He'd been working on it for ages now and at last he was going to have a captive audience.

He didn't especially like getting up in the mornings these days, especially Monday mornings. It would be far easier to just stay in bed, with the curtains pulled protectively against the rest of the world. Easier to pretend that he was safe and nothing had ever changed.

Some days Will would lie in his cocoon and think about the younger version of himself. He could still remember what it was like to throw off his duvet in the morning and leap out of bed as soon as the first crack of light peered cheekily around the side of his Toy Story curtains. He'd always been eager to start the day back then no matter what lay ahead. Each new morning was like the unwrapping of a gift and the curiosity of his tender years wanted to embrace it with enthusiasm.

The best days were always those when his older brother was around to play with. There were only three years between them, but to Will it seemed as though Jacob had a lifetime of worldly wisdom, and he was the person that Will wanted to be like the most when he grew up.

Will's favourite game in the world to play with his brother was Cowboys and Indians. Jacob always made out that he was far too old for such silliness, but Will knew that deep down he loved it just as much as he did.

"Do we have to play this stupid game again Will?" He'd ask, huffing and puffing while digging out his old cowboy hat and toy gun. By this time Will's hopeful face would already be adorned with warrior stripes courtesy of his mum's waxy red lipstick, his feathered headdress tickling the back of his neck.

It was the most fun thing ever for Will, and even though he never got to be the cowboy, he still enjoyed dressing up like a Red Indian Chief. Clutching his plastic bow and arrow set to his skinny

The Ballad of Billy the Kid

little chest, he would shout Apache war cries until his dad yelled for him to keep the bloody noise down.

On rainy days, the game turned into hide and seek inside the house. Will would scamper off on his make believe horse, leaving Jacob to count to ten before shouting “Coming to find those pesky Injuns!”

Holed away under a bed or behind the overstuffed lounge furniture, Will would try to breathe as quietly as possible. The sound of his heart thudding loudly in his ears, and a lopsided grin on his face. Each time he would be convinced that he’d found the perfect spot, but unwittingly leaving part of his headdress poking out, generally led to his untimely capture.

If he had the power to turn back the clock to those times, he would do it in a heartbeat. Those silly inconsequential days of masquerading as Butch Cassidy and Sitting Bull were where everything good was kept, safe and secure. Unlike now.

The day that Jacob had been hit and killed by a speeding car was the day that changed Will’s world forever. Nothing and no-one could reach him, and although his life went on, to Will it felt like it only went on around him. He slowly became an observer, a ghost in his own life.

Overnight he lost all interest in the things that previously made him who he was. He stopped interacting with the people around him and the only laughter in his life was the tinned variety which came from his mother’s moronic TV sitcoms.

One by one his friends slowly drifted away. At twelve years old none of them were equipped with the patience or compassion to warrant staying close to a boy who was no longer fun, and no longer the person they knew; or wanted to get to know. He was now the outcast, the weirdo who insisted on wearing his dead brother’s cowboy hat to school.

The only people that didn’t avoid him were the bullies of course. Those bastards would actively seek him out and torture him for their own entertainment.

The Ballad of Billy the Kid

‘Wassamatta Brokeback?’ they’d taunt as they ran off with Jacob’s hat, ready to fling it on the school roof yet again. It would have been awful for a boy who was still capable of feeling anything.

His parents had seemed to follow some kind of storybook cliché of failing marriage and failing at caring for their remaining son. Will guessed he’d never been their favourite, never been their priority, and without the glue of Jacob holding the three of them together still, they no longer had anything in common anymore. They had tried, in their own way, but grief had swallowed them up and left no room for anything else.

The world around Will had changed from one that had previously had its doors flung wide to welcome possibility. It felt now as though those doors were firmly closed to contain him in the metaphorical dark room that he inhabited. The only light came from its tiny spy hole that allowed him to peek out with a distorted view of the outside world.

The razor blades had helped a little bit. They allowed the cracks of light and tiny glimmers of calm into his world as they bit into his skin like a thousand tiny arrows. While they relieved the pressure that built behind his skin, it meant that the scars were legion. A latticework of raised tributes along his thighs and arms. Will didn’t mind the way they looked too much though, and in some respects he was even proud of them, as they were all in honour of Jacob.

It wasn’t enough though anymore. He needed something that would stop the numbness. Like a junkie who has to up his dose to get the same hit, he needed more than those tiny little blades to release him from the snapping jaws of the black dog.

When he came across the 3D printer on the internet his parents had bought it for him without question. He knew they would as it was the only way they could assuage their guilt by buying him whatever he wanted; or whatever they thought he wanted.

Most of the gifts they’d bought were often duplicated by each other and then left largely unopened. Trainers still clean and new in their boxes, and the computer games piled under a layer of dust on the window sill; but the printer was different. It sat on his desk surrounded by the various items that

The Ballad of Billy the Kid

he'd made with it, each one more complex than the last. His parents had congratulated themselves that finally something had seemed to catch Will's interest.

He'd started with simple tool handles, then a pin hole camera, followed by several kinetic sculptures which boasted unbelievably intricate workings. The technicality and the precision were so immersive on occasion that he came close to finding a kind of peace in what he was doing. If he'd been a different boy, one whose world hadn't already fallen apart, he knew that this would have been his passion.

For now, Will was just pleased that he had all the relevant parts made and ready for his new project. All he had to do was put it together and he could then bring it in for today's presentation.

School had been something to be endured over the last few years, and he had only done the bare minimum to scrape through. He had been flunking badly without really caring.. until now. Now he had something to care about.

Following the itemised instructions taken from the internet, Will carefully assembled his latest piece before sitting back in his desk chair to admire his work. He was amazed that he'd actually been able to do it. Amazed that it had been so simple. Amazed that he had finally found something that was going to stop him from hurting.

The radio was still playing some inane crap as he packed his frayed canvas school bag with everything that he needed for for his presentation. Not that much as it turned out. Just his brother's hat, the pre-sourced bullets and the 3D printed gun. That was it.

Today he was finally going to be the cowboy.