

The Fall of Buffalo Bill

by Ingrid K. V. Hardy

It is Cary's favorite time of day. School is finished and he is alone, outside his home; and that is the way Cary likes it.

Buffalo Bill is having a grand time today! In one corner of the backyard where the grass is bare, Cary is leading the little plastic Bill to victory over his enemies, firing his rifle at all the villains. Shooting them dead. They sure won't touch Bill anymore.

Cary congratulates the cowboy, and puts the figure in the one jacket pocket with no holes in it and goes to dig out the house key from the little hole besides the basement window. Cary knows that window very well. The wood on the inside part has many little play figures scratched into it. Those little play figures had lots of time to invent games to pass away the days last summer.

Cary knows he is a bad boy. He made his dad go away. He made him drink. He made his mother bring Harold home

But Bill was still with him! He'd be just lost without Bill.

The window does not have the key. Again. His mother often forgets the key. Cary gives out a big sigh and sits down besides the house wall. Bill wants to eat. He didn't eat since yesterday.

"I'm sorry, Bill. Maybe tonight, 'kay?" No answer from the pocket. "Maybe I've forgotten something in my schoolbag..." But he already knows, as he rifles through the ripped sheets and broken pencils that there is nothing. There never is.

There is something. Something Cary has not seen in months. A little card. Cary takes it out. It's a valentine card. Little red hearts jump about on it, happy faces grin at Cary and Cary smiles back. Every year the class exchanges valentine cards, and every year Cary's big envelope on the back wall of the bright class room was empty. Except this year. Karen put one in his big, empty envelope. Cary knew it was Karen because she always draws little kittens on everything she writes on. Happy kittens. Cary had been so happy to see the card, he felt good! It was the first time... And what did he do?

Nothing. What does one do? Cary had no idea. So he did nothing.

Karen has even said hello. But only once. Her friend whispered in her ear, and then Karen never said hello again.

All the eight or nine-year olds hold their noses as they walk by Cary's desk or locker. What is it like to wear clean clothes, Cary wonders? Does it feel different?

I bet it feels like being a hero, Cary thinks. Heroes' clothes are always clean when they rescue someone. And new. Brand spanking new.

No I don't want new clothes, Cary thinks. I don't want clothes to hit me too. It makes teachers ask questions and I don't know what to say.

So Cary says nothing. To anyone.

Ever.

And now the teachers don't ask me questions anymore.

Cary takes Buffalo Bill out of his pocket

"Bill, sometimes I wish the teachers would ask me questions again. But I shouldn't want them to ask. So why *do* I want that?"

Bill just held his rifle.

"Oh Bill... It's Friday today. You know what that means." Cary hangs his head. Harold always gets drunk on Friday night and plays loud games with Cary's mother. She's drunk too. And then Harold plays games with Cary.

The wind picks up a bit, giving a bite to the late spring air, baby leaves on the trees fluttering a light little tune.

Spring was a good time. It was easier to stay out of the house.

"Bill, Harold always says it feels good."

Very soon the leaves will not be babies anymore.

"But it doesn't Bill, it doesn't. And I don't like it. Why don't you help me Bill?"

They will be big leaves.

"Why don't you help me? *Why*" Cary yells at his best friend in the world. He does not know he is crying. "What if *you* try how awful it is, will you help me then? Will you??"

Why did he hate Buffalo Bill now?

The tiny, wondrous new Spring leaves become a bit bigger every day. They grow and bend with the wind around them. Cary does not see the little new leaves. He does not wonder what happens to them.

They get big. Big enough to hurt the grass underneath them when they fall. Big enough to kill the other leaves underneath them in the autumn.

It is all they know.

