

## Wild Bill Shakespeare and the Nature of Identity

Carlos Vitteri emptied the bullets from the chamber of his revolver and patted my shoulder as I took his position at the fire, as if to say; tag, you're it. The next morning he blasted his brains across the saloon wall, leaving a stain like cherry juice and a pattern like a fractal.

Now I'm awake as only a guncrack can make you. My billet is some ruin on the other side of the street, probably once been someone's house, but was now reduced to three broken walls and some scorch marks. Only rubble left where the next house used to be. I leave any thoughts of more sleep behind, snatch my Colt from where my gunbelt has been discarded and stagger to the street. As I reach the doorframe – half the wall has gone, but still we use the doors – I see Annie push her way out of the saloon, the doors rattling a tattoo behind her. “Don't bother,” she says. “Carlos.” I curse, spit and stamp back inside, strap on my gunbelt and collect my hat from the floor. Still cursing, I go to take a look.

“Bastard,” Annie says beside me, hands tight in her pockets. “He could've waited until after we'd built the goddamned tower.”

I kneel down and rifle Carlos' pockets, taking his gun, any coins and tobacco he was carrying. I feel something hard in his shirt pocket and pull out a gold signet ring. I toss it up to Annie.

“Nice sparkle,” she says. “You trying to buy your way into something, cowboy?”

“Since when d'you want paying? Come on. We'd best tell Wild Bill.”

“Bill knows.” He speaks all measured-like from the saloon doorway, hands buried in his ankle-length duster. “Jake and Charlie?”

Annie shakes her head. “They were kippin' in the wagon.”

“Tell them we have another man's work to share around.”

In the general scheme of things, this was no shock. The Range took people this way. Something in the dirt or the pollen. Something in the size that could squeeze your mind. Carlos had put the gun to his head every morning for the last three years; his luck had to run out eventually.

Bill looks at the corpse. “Carrying?”

I pass him the block of tobacco. He pulls a flick-knife, slices off a corner and hands it back. He says, “Someone should probably say something,” and goes back outside.

His voice doesn't fit his words, or the clothes he carries around. Maybe he does wear a duster the colour of prairie dirt, old leather boots and have a rifle slung over one shoulder, and maybe his words have soured from the years of riding with lost souls like us, but he has the voice of old England. Accents are hard to lose. Even silent, he is unmistakable; we see it every time we hit a town. Annie and Charlie and Jake and me will play five-draw while he sits at the bar, downing rotgut whisky until the bottle goes dry. Annie will pause and we'll all look, and sure enough some pert groupie will be there, trying to distract him from the drink.

“Are you really him?” she says.

Bill doesn't answer.

“I love your work,” she says.

“You and the rest of the English-speaking world, princess,” Bill says, still not looking her way.

Sometimes the girl will flirt, other times she looks nonplussed; but it always plays out the same way. Bill will down one more glass of whisky and take her upstairs. In a while he'll return and sit with us, as if we'd dare to say a word.

I leave what is left of Carlos behind. The sun is already chopping our shadows short. I take off my hat and try to cool sweat with warm air.

He is standing with Annie and Jake and Charlie by the wagon, where the buildings end and the dusty road melts back into prairie. He hands me a pocket telescope, points horizonward. I see a plume of grey smoke and the glint of sunlight on metal.

“Train's coming,” he says, as I pass the 'scope back. “Get the telegraph built.”

“Carlos?” Charlie asks.

“He ain't going anywhere. We'll throw him to the Range when the tower's done.”

Annie vaults into the wagon's driving seat and clicks the reins. The horses plod into town, and I clamber into the back with Jake and Charlie. It's cool under the canvas and it's going to be a hard day. Save energy anywhere you can. Bill remains at the edge, scanning the Range.

We've been riding ahead of the train for six months now; maybe more, maybe less. Time stutters here, becoming lazy and lagging behind, then rushing to catch up with where it's meant to be. I read in the last paper that came our way that Einstein had a theory for it – dimensional relativity, something about time not being constant in such a large amount of space. I didn't understand much of it and I don't think the journalist did either.

We sit amongst wooden beams, mirrored plates, rivets as thick as my wrist. A flat pack telegraph, and a lighthouse to guide the train in. The tower itself won't be huge; just twelve feet of struts with an array of mirrors mounted on top; but it doesn't have to be. The Range is flat as death and we'll build on top of the highest walls we can find. All we have to do is make it shine. When the navvies arrive with the train they'll hook up all the pulleys and strings that make it talk. And talk it will; shutters going all day and all night, clattering like a horse on concrete. Stuffed amongst all these building blocks of communication is a collection of assorted driftwood, found on the Range and gathered in case it proves useful. We have a clockwork radio; a tarpaulin that had been blowing wild; a grenade found in the hand of a dead Nazi officer, lying in the grass.

We roll past bombed-out houses and their staring windows. No doubt it was war that finally drove off the people who built this place. Looks like an air strike. I imagine the townsfolk; first hearing the drone of the bombers but not realising what's coming their way. Then the first buildings begin to explode and in the mess of brick, fire and shrapnel the screaming starts. As people panic, the Messerschmitts drop, howling the end is nigh and strafing the crowd with lead.

The Range is speckled with these silent towns. The grass opens into a collection of empty houses, sometimes bomb-wrecks like these, sometimes just abandoned, all *Mary Celeste*. There are normally churches, preserved when the train comes because their towers are crowned with our telegraphs. There is no church here, only ruins. Back in civilisation churches are a rare thing; the real evangelists may try hard, but after waking up here it's hard to believe in their afterlife.

We've never yet found an inhabited town. I sometimes wonder if this place is trying to tell us something.

Annie stops the wagon across the street from the saloon. Charlie has the ladder out of the wagon and against the saloon wall. I help Jake with the winch as Charlie climbs to the roof, stamps once, twice.

"Solid!"

We carry the winch up the ladder in pieces for Charlie to assemble at the top. Annie ties the horses and comes to help. They won't go anywhere and there's no-one here to steal them, but it's habit.

He leans against a building, chewing tobacco, watching everything. The rifle is still slung over his shoulder, but I know it can go from this position to aimed and smoking inside five seconds. He's still wearing the duster, even though the sweat is glistening on his forehead.

Annie fumbles a crate of rivets, and they hit the dust with a sound like a bombdrop. He detaches from the building and helps her collect the bolts, packing them into the crate and taking it to the winch. Once it is being hauled jerkily upward he fetches more parts from the wagon, never saying a thing.

People expect the words to flow from his mouth like notes from a clarinet; perfect rhythm, perfect pitch. These days his words come like the prairie wind, dry gusts or nothing at all. He was never as talkative or as easy with words as his plays might suggest, but it was the village of statues that made him shut up completely. The rifle jerked into every shadow.

There were statues of people running, some overbalanced and shattered. Others in the road of people clutching at their throats, some on their knees, some wide eyed and mouths wide open. In one building there was the statue of a little girl, huddled in the corner, her mouth twisted in silent pain and clear quartz tears making her face shine.

Jake, who does not have a classical education, looked in disgust at the statues and said "What is this? Ain't no stone for miles. What the fuck they make these things for?"

Our find had the philosophers going for weeks. It raised, I was told, real questions about this place we found ourselves in. And I thought; great, because we need more of them. We were here. We did not age. We still died, through other means. When we did... something. Maybe nothing.

Carlos first put the gun to his head the next morning, and when the hammer clicked onto a chamber he hadn't realised was empty he began to do it every day. He said, "It really makes you feel alive."

The village of statues was one reason the train was coming; why we were building the telegraph road. We told civilisation what was out here, and civilisation couldn't wait to come see.

We raise four wooden poles and bake in the afternoon sun. Stripped to the waist we are, even Annie. Gun belts lie discarded. Wild Bill has taken off his duster.

I look up as we hear the faint whup-whup-whup of a distant helicopter. It's there, a speck far above. Not one of ours; the whirlybirds don't travel this far out. Like the Messerschmitts and bombers that I imagine finished off this town, it is a creature of the Range. Either it will find its way out again or run out of fuel and crash.

I remember being told about the Bermuda triangle, and wonder if we are on the other side.

We work through the day. Jake spits at a splinter and Annie curses as only she can at another wandering whirlybird. He says nothing, until "We need more rivets." He makes for the ladder and motions me to follow.

“Things are pliable,” I once heard Einstein say, the last time we were in civilisation and he came to drink whisky with Wild Bill. “My peers, I must say, are spending sleepless nights trying to reconcile their physics with the way this world is built. But I confess it seems to me that this world is structured less of atoms and forces than it is of words on a page.”

We are still in the wagon when the hammering abruptly stops, and we hear the thump of wings. Big, slow and heavy. Not mechanical. I look at Bill, who shrugs. I jump out of the wagon to take a look and I swear my heart stops beating. Between us and the saloon I see the wings, huge and black as if from some tarred angel, and where those wings curl down to the shoulder blades there is a mess of vipers, writhing and struggling and rippling.

Wild Bill comes to see what has frozen me, and his eyes have barely touched the Gorgon before he drags me behind the wagon. His rifle is still on the rooftop, with my pistols. My teeth are clenched, my eyes tight shut. I wish for the report of a gun and the thump of the snake-haired bitch biting earth, but I know it isn't coming. Annie and Jake and Charlie, even if they are not already standing stone, will not dare look to shoot. Instead, there is only the tap of the Gorgon's taloned feet and the slipflick of her heavy tongue as she tastes the air.

I shuffle behind the horse, hoping the animal's scent will mask my own. I pray to God she will just leave, become bored and hunt elsewhere, and then my head falls into my hands because I realise I am praying and I think of all the empty churches in every single one of these cold dead towns, and see that though all we found in this post-life wasteland was grass and empty space and the remains of those who had died before, there are things out here that can make you pray.

The tongue slaps air. I feel cold. The horse chokes and stamps and tries to neigh. My breath stutters as I feel its skin harden and cool against my back. She's coming. I shut my eyes so hard it hurts and scramble along the edge of the wagon. I will not escape, but still I have to run.

I scream as a hand grips my shoulder and open my eyes on reflex. Wild Bill puts one finger to his lips. His other hand holds the grenade. “If this doesn't work,” he says, “then you run. Only then.”

And he steps into the street. And there is no sound. And I dare not look. And there is an explosion.

Annie tells me about it around the fire that night. She says they used the mirrors to watch from the saloon roof. Says Wild Bill and the gorgon were practically right below them. She thinks the gorgon had smelled them, and was coming. “Bloody amazing,” she says. “Bloody stupid. I would've thrown it and run but he stands there, and she sees him, right? So she walks over till she's right in front of him. And she opens her mouth and she's got these teeth, Jesus... She sees he ain't rock so she opens her mouth and his hand comes up, shoves the grenade in, pulls the pin and walks away. Must've had his eyes shut the whole damn time. Fucking psycho.” I can't tell if she's awed or furious, and I don't think she knows either.

She goes to find her billet. I wrap my coat around me and kick the fire. I can see some reasons behind his methods, and the critics and psychologists would probably say “Well, of course, Shakespeare is renowned for his dramatic flair, and naturally some of that theatricality will translate to his personality.” But it still looks like a suicide attempt.

I turn to the sound of footsteps and he sits down, next to the fire. He chops off a slice of tobacco and offers me the block. I refuse.

He chews. He spits. He says, “I'm not going any further. When the train gets in, I'm going back.” “The city?”

He nods. “Maybe go see Einstein. He owes me a drink.” He looks behind me, towards the statue of the horse. “You carrying on?”

I shrug. “I guess. Got nowhere else to go.”

He nods. “If you meet Caliban, tell him I'm sorry.” He stands, spits into the fire. “Even out here, I'm still bloody Shakespeare.”

After he has gone, I poke the fire again and wait for Charlie to relieve me. I look up but the stars are smothered by the telegraph tower; lamps are placed under the mirrors so even in the dark it can guide the train in. The navvies will work through the night, and be here by morning.