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The Bard's Quill

Billy Bacon was a boy with a problem. He was approaching his final term of the school year; at the end of which he would normally have moved up into the higher grade of year 10. The trouble was his handwriting. "I feel really sorry for him," his sister Anne was saying to their mother. "Billy has some amazing ideas for stories, and he tells them brilliantly; but when he comes to put them on paper his handwriting is so scrappy you can barely read them."

"Well, he is dyslexic," her mother reminded Anne.

"I know that," insisted her daughter, "And it explains why he gets words and sometimes letters and numbers back to front; but surely he can do something about the way he writes? If we could help him to practise and get better over the holidays, maybe he could make a really good job of the project he's been given. Then he won't have repeat grade 9 next year."

Although Billy knew nothing of this conversation, he was very aware of his medical condition. In most respects he was no different to other children, except that occasionally he would put things in the wrong place or order. Even though he knew the right way, for some reason his hands didn't want to do what his mind told them. So, as far as his writing went, he did know how to spell and could say the letters of the words quite correctly out loud; but when he wrote them down on paper, somehow everything got jumbled. Perhaps this was the reason his handwriting was quite terrible, and he was doing it deliberately to disguise the mistakes he made with words and sentences; reasoning that if his work was hard for the teachers to read, they might not notice the parts that were wrong. Unfortunately, they generally did, which was why he was facing having to stay down in grade 9 next year.

For a few more moments he continued to glare at the sheet of paper on his desk. It was the story he was supposed to be writing for the project; only it could hardly be called writing – spider's scrawl was more like and even Billy had trouble reading it. Lurching up from the chair, he trudged over to the bed and slumped down on the edge. There was a book on the bedside table: "Writing Made Easier", and there were some useful ideas in it; but each time he tried them out, none seemed to help. He guessed he would just have to do his best and resign himself to his fate. So he ignored this book and picked up another.

It was one he'd bought for 10 cents from a jumble sale, and it looked very old. The cover was torn and the pages had turned yellow which, for Billy, made the stories it contained seem like a blast from the past. They told of days gone by when there were no cars, and people got around on horseback or in horse-drawn carriages. The part he really enjoyed was about exciting tales of mail deliveries by Pony Express riders, men and women who had to ride full pelt, braving dangers from wild weather, Indian raiding parties and bandits.

As he read, he began to feel disappointed that he was almost at the end of the book; but then, the same thing had happened before and he simply started again from the beginning. This was his intention as he reached the last page; but something caught his eye that he hadn't taken notice of before. It was an advertisement inside the back cover declaring that readers who wished to enter the competition should send their submission early to arrive no later than... And

here was yet another disappointment – the closing date was October 30th 1806. Billy groaned: it was already 215 years too late for him! Breathing a heavy sigh, he comforted himself with the fact that the address the submission had to be sent to was, or would have been, a place in England; and that was thousands of kilometres away. Despite this, had it been an up-to-date competition and he'd managed to post his submission within the next week, it would still have had a good chance of getting there well on time. Even though the address was the other side of the world, his competition entry wouldn't have to rely on the Pony Express to deliver it, not in these days of air mail.

Ignoring the fact that there was really no point in worrying about it, he was eager to know more about the competition. What was the prize? Reading on, Billy became excited. The winner of the competition would receive something called The Bard's Quill, an old-fashioned pen made from a bird's feather that helped greatly improve writing skills. He frowned. Had *they* made a spelling mistake and the prize was actually The *Bird's* Quill? Whatever: anything that could make his handwriting better was worth going for. But he was dreaming - the competition had finished ages ago. Then again, maybe they'd got the date wrong too. If they'd put in the wrong century, the competition might not close until 2006, which was now. It was a thought. Okay, what would he have to do to stand a chance of winning? It seemed clear enough – write a short explanation of why he believed he truly needed The Bard's (or Bird's) Quill.

For the rest of that day and the next few, Billy took to writing: making notes to start with; then forming them into a story of himself and his problems. Many times he screwed up the paper he was writing on and threw it in the bin; but he would begin again immediately. By and by, The Story of Billy Bacon eventually took shape. Having read his final draft over and over, he decided that it was the best it could be; the story itself, that was. His handwriting, however, was still pretty awful. With a sigh of resignation, he folded the two pages and slipped them into an envelope. He had already addressed this, but checked it against the advertisement to ensure he had put it down right. To him, it looked okay. He'd even changed their spelling mistake:

The Bird's Quill Competition
Harkaway Cottage
Stafford
England
The Other Side of the World

All it needed now was a stamp and... The door opened. "It's getting late," said his mother's voice as she poked her head into the room. "Lights out, Billy. Sleep tight." Then she had gone. He hadn't realised it was so late. Posting his competition entry would have to wait until tomorrow.

Billy tossed and turned in his sleep, his head full of dream-like images. At first he was flying, his destination marked along the way by signposts directing him to The Other Side of the World. Then, presumably, he was there; watching a pony express rider racing past another sign which said Stratford-upon-Avon. The rider was leaning forward over the neck of his horse, arm outstretched; and in his hand an envelope. He was heading towards a group of people in the distance; one man in particular whose hand was open, perhaps waiting to take the envelope. Only, as is often the way of dreams, the horse-rider never got any closer; so the waiting people gave up and went into a nearby house.

The very next moment, Billy was standing in front of the house; and he was the one now holding the envelope – the envelope with his competition entry. He knew it was because of the address; except it seemed he had written the name of the town as Stafford, and he even had the cottage-name wrong. He'd written it as Harkaway when the name on the door was Hathaway – just as well he was delivering it by hand. Although he didn't recall either knocking on the door or opening it, he guessed he must have because he was suddenly inside. The room was quite dark, illuminated by oil lamps, yet there was enough light to clearly see four people sitting behind

a long wooden desk. They all smiled as he approached; and one of them was the man he thought he'd seen who had been waiting for the Pony Express rider to deliver the envelope. "You must be Billy Bacon," he said pleasantly. "We have been expecting you. It would undoubtedly have been a long journey for you. Please take a seat at the table." He pointed across the room. "There is bread and cheese and some cordial. Rest while we consider your entry."

His hand came out and Billy placed the envelope in it. Looking down at the scrappy handwriting the man frowned. This is it, thought Billy – they won't even bother reading my story: they won't be able to. I've messed up again. When the man said: "It may take a little time," that seemed to confirm what the boy was thinking as he went over to the table. He sat and began eating; at the same time listening to the murmur of voices in the background. They became gradually fainter until the room lapsed into silence. Billy turned to look back at the desk; but it had gone, so had the people; in fact, he could see nothing because the room was in total darkness. Why he did it, he had no idea; but he reached sideways and switched on his lamp – *HIS* lamp! He was back in his own room, lying on his bed.

So, it was just a dream; and he had to admit it came as no surprise. He guessed it was the price to pay for having an imagination and the gift for story-telling. It was a shame, though, that this fantasy couldn't have come true. Glancing at the book on the bedside cabinet he wondered about the competition entry and why he had even bothered to write it in the first place. Now it would be just a few more screwed up pieces of paper to toss in the bin. Sliding out of bed, he opened the book with that in mind and found himself staring wide-eyed. His envelope had gone, in its place another larger one. Extending a finger, he touched it gingerly and immediately snatched his hand away as if he had received an electric shock; but that wasn't the case. Nothing had happened to him, and it was just an ordinary envelope. Or was it...?

Next, he was holding his breath as he took up the envelope and turned it over to discover it had been sealed with red wax – the way they used to do with letters in the old days; the very old days. Heart pumping faster with each passing second, he broke the seal, raised the flap and withdrew a sheet of stiff, yellowing paper. "Woah!" The exclamation burst from his lips at what he was seeing:

Congratulations Billy Bacon
You are the winner of The Bard's Quill
Use it well, and use it wisely
W.S.

Now his heart had stopped beating altogether and his breath was coming in short, sharp gasps as he reached for the item resting on the paper between the words. It seemed like just a bird's feather, except that the bare, fat end had been cut into a point. For some reason he touched the point with his finger and felt a small prick; but there was no sign of blood; just a black dot that looked like ink...

You, the reader, will likely guess what happened next; although you will be telling yourself that it was merely a make-believe fantasy. What else could it be when the tale continued about a young boy with dyslexia who went on to write an amazing adventure which gained him praise from everyone who could actually read it, and do so without a problem?

Well, believe it or not, it's true. Not only did Billy prove with his writing that he was worthy of moving up to grade 10 at school; but he went on to write many stories that won him fame and fortune throughout the country and the world. He was, however, and would still be the same Billy as he had always been; although he did change his writing name to William S Bacon.