

The Inheritance

Buck pulled the car over atop a hill and checked his cell. Two bars might be enough. He hit redial and waited.

"Where are you?"

"Hi, Mom. I'm getting close to the border. I don't want to pay for service in Canada so..."

"So I'm not going to hear from you again?"

"I don't know."

"Tristen why don't you come home? You know your grandfather was crazy. He never went to the Yukon. He never had any Gold."

"You don't know that."

"He made up those stories to deal with trauma from the war. The Doctor explained it all. Said he'd never seen a worse case of PTSD."

"It doesn't matter. I promised."

"Does a promise even count if the one promised can't understand? He didn't know what he was asking you."

"A promise made is a debt unpaid."

"Oh quit it. You recite that poem like it means something."

"He would read that poem to me when I was a kid."

"You're gonna get yourself killed."

"Maybe."

"I took you away from him to protect you. He had your head filled with so much nonsense. I knew something like this was going to happen."

"Protect me? So your idea of protection was taking me away from your father, who told stories, and moving us in with your piece-of-shit boyfriend? How's that bruise healing?"

"Stop."

"That last coherent thing he said to me was to spread his ashes with Sam McGee."

"And where is that exactly? Are you going to travel all over Canada looking for a grave that never existed outside of some stupid poem?"

"It wasn't stupid to him. And now that he's gone, it means a lot to me."

"Tristen don't do this. Come back."

"People call me Buck. I'm sorry Mom. I'm doing this."

"Your grandfather called you Buck. I named you Tristen."

"It's Buck."

The line went dead. Buck couldn't tell if the call had dropped, or if his mom had hung up. It didn't matter. The conversation was over.

Buck took inventory of his inheritance. A cardboard container with Gramps' ashes. A piece of notebook paper, written just weeks prior to his death by the trembling, feeble hand of his grandfather. "To Buck, my pride, I leave all my treasure."

His mother and cousins mocked him over the last will and testament of his grandfather. "Gramps' only treasure was a pile of debt and an empty bottle of Jack Daniels." They were jealous. The others dismissed Gramps' stories of gold and hardship on the Klondike, but Buck had listened with a child's naiveté.

One more thing Buck kept, a half-used bottle of Yukon Gold aftershave. Probably made in China. It smelled like he bought it from a gas station. Gramps' aroma. It was a batch of cookies just out of the oven, the flowerbed lining the front porch. It was the fragrance of home.

He drove North into Canada and into the advancing winter. Buck coasted into Whitehorse, out of gas and out of light. He walked into a bar to drink a beer and find a job.

"Fellow who usually drives the snow plow got hurt last week. I'd call him." The owner-bartender let him use the house phone. He agreed to drive the plow and act as a caretaker, for the healing driver in exchange for room and board, along with one-third of the driver's government salary.

The long winter dragged on. Plowing was harder, purer work than Buck had ever known. He used his scant free time to search the internet for the final resting place of Sam McGee.

Sam McGee, according to the poem, was cremated on the Marge of Lake Leberge. Buck had no idea what a Marge was, but he found Lake Leberge just north of town. When the sun began to linger in the southern sky, he borrowed a snow machine to investigate. There were some ruined cabins on the banks that could have been built last century or last year. There was no sign of the *Alice May*. Nor any remnant of Sam McGee, or his grandfather. He searched newspaper archives, asked about library card holders, and even checked utility records. There was no evidence of Gramps in Whitehorse. Buck racked his memory for place names from stories told to a child by a crazy man. He remembered "Yukon," "Klondike," and "Dawson."

Winter yielded and Buck was no closer to finding Sam McGee. He packed the rusty Jeep he'd traded for his sedan and pointed it north.

Buck arrived in Dawson two days after the ice broke on the Yukon. He immediately began to search for his Grandfather's name. Nothing at the newspaper office. Nothing at the library. Someone at the bar suggested Buck try the Mining Recorder's office.

“You think your Grandfather was a prospector?”

“I don’t know. He used to tell me stories about this place. I mean the Yukon. My mom thought he was crazy.”

“Did he ever say anything about a gold mine? Anything like that.”

“Oh yeah. Said he was a wealthy man. He used to say he was sitting on a million bucks.”

“Did he leave a map or anything?”

“No. Would there be any record of him here?”

“I can see if he made a claim.” The clerk disappeared into a back room. After several minutes he returned. “Looks like he did make a claim. Back in 65. Way up the Klondike.”

“Can I get there?”

“It won’t be easy.” The clerk opened a map. Follow this road to where it ends at the river. Then walk about 12 miles up this canyon. The claim was here. He pointed to a place on the map.

“How would I know if he was really there?”

“If he was prospecting, he’d have been by water. Find a stream and search for any tools. If you find something old, odds are it was his.”

“You ever heard of Sam McGee?”

“Everyone around here knows about Sam McGee.”

“Was he real?”

The clerk rubbed his chin. “I don’t think so. Why?”

“My gramps wanted his ashes scattered with Sam McGee.”

“Was your gramps alright? I mean, in the head?”

“No. Thanks for your help.”

“Good luck. Oh, if you wanna work that claim, you’ll have to file a new one.”

Buck went to a hardware store and bought supplies for his overland trek. He'd spent no time in the outdoors, so he had no idea what he'd need. His pack was heavy and cumbersome.

The Jeep made it all the way to the river without falling apart. Buck shouldered the heavy pack and set about the hike. Up and up he climbed. There would be no darkness this night, so he continued into the canyon where the claim had been. A small stream carried water from the snowcaps above to the Klondike River.

Forgoing a meal he walked the stream up the valley. There was an avalanche scar with a dark spot about halfway up the canyon. Buck left the creek to investigate and found a faint, overgrown trail leading up. A few logs had been placed to make steps. About halfway up the mountain, some large rocks had piled and formed an overhang. The rocks sheltered a small

spot from both snow and sun. Inside was an old stove, with a chimney ascending through the rocks. A cot was still assembled in one corner. Next to the cot was an old ammo can. Buck nearly broke his knife getting the latch open. As it creaked open the waft of Yukon Gold aftershave burnt his nose. The stuff had leaked slowly out of the bottle and soaked into the rest of the contents. Gramps had been here. Buck smelled him. Letters were etched into the door of the stove. "Alice May."

Here at last was Sam McGee. He removed Gramps' ashes from his pack and placed them on the stove. In the ammo can reeking from aftershave was a letter from the War Department. It had Gramps' name and demanded he report for duty not later than September 15, 1965. There was an old film canister in the ammo can as well. Inside were a few, tiny golden flakes. Even Buck recognized them. Gramps' treasure. My inheritance. Buck laughed into the solitude. It probably wasn't enough gold to buy a tank of gas.

Smelling Gramps' aftershave recalled the stories from Buck's childhood. He found a shovel, a pan, and a steel bucket. He filled the bucket with dirt and carried it to the creek. He'd never done any gold panning, but stories of Yukon gold have instructions built in. The first pan yielded no gold. But the second had one flake. By the time he was through the first bucket of dirt, he'd found a few more.

Before he slept, Buck gathered several armfuls of dead wood. The furnace looked solid. Buck tried a small fire and smoke drafted out the chimney. The faithful stove had waited patiently for Gramps through all those Yukon winters. Buck built a roaring fire, then placed the cardboard container with the ashes inside. He closed the door quickly, Gramps was finally safe from the storm that had raged in his mind since 1965.

A day later, he hiked back with calloused hands and an aching back. The film canister contained a layer of gold flakes, just enough to spark the fever. The mining office was his first stop back in town. The clerk recognized him. "Did you find it?"

"Yes sir. And I'd like to file that claim."