

Woodsmoke

There once was a young boy who, keeping close to the heat of the woodstove, would sit on the floor of a cabin and listen to the sound of his grandfather's voice. Every night his grandfather would tell tales, wild tales of wild things, and with wide eyes the boy latched on to every word.

Having been brought up in the Yukon's far north, working for years as a trapper, dog-musher, and prospector, the boy's grandfather had been hardened by a lifetime of freezing winters. Now, even in old age, he was a bushman with every fibre of his being, right down to his bowler hat and bushy white beard. He had some wild tales to tell indeed.

The old man had been barely eighteen when he'd travelled south during the California gold rush of 1848—his one and only trip outside the north. But the southern heat had been too much for him, and he'd quickly returned to the Yukon even before the rush's peak in 1852. Though his pockets were empty still, gold had made an everlasting impression on him.

As luck would have it, the rush would start up again, closer to home this time, word of gold spreading throughout the Klondike like wildfire nearly five decades later. The chance for adventure was upon him once more.

But soon the northern rush of '98 came to an end as well, and it was 1903 when the old man found himself spending his nights sitting back in his rocking chair, puffing on a long pipe. Tales resting on the tip of his tongue, he would look to his grandson and quietly begin.

An inexhaustible source of stories from his youth, he had. Most were crazy, dangerous, and plain unbelievable, but with his only audience being a boy of five years old, his small grandson hardly ever asked questions, and thought the stories true with all of his heart. All of them were, of course, if a little embellished; the old man was no liar.

There were tales that spoke of his grandfather once racing a team of sled dogs over a mountain pass, or canoeing down whitewater rapids in the peak of summer; hiking through foothills to the coastline of the Beaufort Sea, or scaling ice-cliffs to reach a snowy summit. Camping under the aurora on the coldest nights of winter, huddled 'round a fire with the eyes of wolves glowing in the surrounding darkness. It seemed to the boy there was little his grandfather *hadn't* done.

Chasing after adventure, discovering the beauty of the north all in the name of gold, his grandfather had surely lived a life of purpose; a life of ultimate freedom. And to experience ultimate freedom was the secret of man—the secret the young boy hoped to experience for himself one day, too. He thought that by listening to his grandfather's stories, he might learn how to go about obtaining a life untethered, which he had come to so desire, even at his young age. The boy's mind was impressionable, and the old man's tales surely made an impression. So night after night, the boy listened.

One night in particular, in late autumn, the spindly branches of a tree scraping at the cabin window, the old man plunged into a story, as had become custom before bed. He knew it was a favourite of his

grandson's, for whenever he began, the young boy would always scoot closer, straining to hear his low voice:

"My father, and his father before him, used to tell me this story when *I* was a boy," the old man said matter-of-factly. "Well, I suppose it's more of a legend, but a story nonetheless." He relit his smouldering pipe and began in the same way he always did. The young boy welcomed those first words as someone might welcome an old friend.

"There is a legend as old as the mountains. A legend that all the best sourdoughs know." He huffed to himself, thinking that after all these years spent in the north, he had a claim to that title.

"Even before the days of the southern rush, there was rumoured to be a gold mine hidden in the north, somewhere out in the wild country. It was a mountain, small next to most, but special. A hollow cavern layed on the western side of this mountain, and inside, rock had been replaced with gold. You needn't your prospector's pan, for the entire cavern floor was a gold vein, hundreds of feet wide, the yellow metal speckled freely across the cavern walls. You had only to reach out a wanting hand, and pluck the pieces free."

The young boy's eyes widened, and the old man smiled. After hearing other tales of his prospecting days, it was obvious that his grandson had adopted a lust for gold—one that ran in the family, it would seem, as they came from a long line of prospectors. There was a similar wistful look in the old man's eyes, as he, too, lusted after it still. Seventy-three years of life had not been long enough to quench this desire he'd been born with.

"Many northern men had heard of such a place," he continued, "but none had seen the treasure with their own eyes. The gold mine was lost, and could only be found by those who already knew where it was. Or so the tale goes."

His grandson's brows furrowed deeply. "That doesn't make much sense," the boy said glumly, trying to understand. He had heard the tale many times before, but had never gotten this part. How had the mine ever been discovered for the first time if you already had to know where to find it?

"It doesn't make *any* sense," the old man replied. "But it isn't supposed to. Hush up, now." He rose from his chair to toss another log into the woodstove, but upon settling back down, he picked up where he had left off so seamlessly it was as if he hadn't paused at all.

"Its riches were said to be unparalleled; so much gold had never before been seen all in one place. Just hearing about it was a prospector's wildest dream. It is said that only those who already knew the mine's location could find it. I believe that is because the less who knew of its existence, the better. If any man had free access and claim to such riches, he would certainly fall victim to greed, as so many others have—as I surely would have, had I found it. He would certainly commit awful deeds, and go to great lengths, to hoard the yellow metal and keep every last piece for himself. And that is why the fabled gold mine is hidden, and why it must stay hidden, for then it retains its magic. When the last of those who know where to find it part this earth, the cavern of gold will truly be lost forever."

He sighed, the images his own words had created in his mind fading with the story's end. "It is inevitable that this legend of gold will pass from living memory. But that is why I spend these nights telling it to you, so that may never happen in your lifetime. You may never see the mine, as I have never seen it, no matter how hard I searched. But it will be up to you, your duty as a prospector's grandson, to keep the story alive so long as you are living."

A response to this was beyond the reach of the boy, whose eyes had begun to droop with sleep. It had grown late, and the moon was high beyond the windowpane. His grandfather gave a soft smile, and spoke with the same voice the boy would remember years from now; the voice whose stories would lure him out into the wild to have an adventure of his own, and to perhaps find the gold that the old man could not:

"There, now. Off to bed with you." He led his grandson away, into his bed, and drew the patchwork quilt up to his chin. The small boy was asleep before the bedside candle had been snuffed out, and his grandfather's fate was soon the same.

The night wore on. The air was still, not a sound to be heard save for the wind, and the steady pattern of two souls breathing; breathing in the dwindling fragrances of pipe tobacco, of sweet woodsmoke, of autumn leaves at the window. Scents of home, and ones that would always bring the young boy back to this night, and would always remind him of this tale that caught at his heart.

And there in the quietude of dusk was an old man who dreamed of a wild youth long passed; dreamed of gold and freedom and adventure. And in the next room was the boy, young and restless, who longed for the same, and in years to come, would get it.