

# Home Beckons

by Angie

*'What is it to be at home?'*

- Samuel Beckett

Devin sat in a pub in Whitehouse, Yukon, having really nowhere else to go and wanting the sound of people around him. Although a loner, generally, in the north he was often overawed by the scenery. He found himself, more often than not, nursing a pint where the horizon was limited by the bar and the mirror behind it reflected a cosy space warmed by a fireplace, and humming with life.

He had checked out a local second hand store, and on whim, bought an old paperback book of poems by Robert Service. Of course he knew the famous one – *The Cremation of Sam McGee* – he and Vincent has recited it often to the echoing halls deep in the world below.

Devin smiled as he remembered and recited it to himself, amazed that he still remembered it after all these years.

*'There are strange things done in the midnight sun  
By the men who toil for gold;  
The Arctic trails have their secret tales  
That would make your blood run cold;  
The Northern Lights have seen queer sights,  
But the queerest they ever did see  
Was that night on the marge of Lake Lebarge  
I cremated Sam McGee.'*

He chuckled softly as he seated himself with his pint and opened the yellowing softcover to the first poem, appropriately called, *'The Spell of the Yukon'*. As he read, he was thinking to himself that he had never really appreciated the talent of this poet, until coming to the land he'd loved to see it for himself.

Of course, it was written from the perspective of a gold miner, back in old placer mining days, but the words were so beautifully apt. They described this place he had been living, unable to leave it, without really understanding why. This Canadian nailed it, Devin decided.

*No! There's the land. (Have you seen it?)  
It's the cussedest land that I know,  
From the big, dizzy mountains that screen it  
To the deep, deathlike valleys below.  
Some say God was tired when He made it;  
Some say it's a fine land to shun;  
Maybe; but there's some as would trade it  
For no land on earth — and I'm one.*

What followed was a reminder of the life of a gold miner ... then the next stanza almost made him weep. Devin sighed as he read it. THIS was why he couldn't leave!

*I've stood in some mighty-mouthed hollow  
That's plumb-full of hush to the brim;  
I've watched the big, husky sun wallow  
In crimson and gold, and grow dim,  
Till the moon set the pearly peaks gleaming,  
And the stars tumbled out, neck and crop;  
And I've thought that I surely was dreaming,  
With the peace o' the world piled on top.*

Devin thought of Vincent and wished he could be here to see this land, that was so sparsely inhabited, but full of such magnificence. He had been here almost a year now, through the summer and winter, and now it was spring. Funny that the poet had written the seasons in exactly that order. The imagery struck him to the core and his eyes burned as he read the last lines of two stanzas.

*'The summer – no sweeter was ever;  
The sunshiny woods all athrill;  
The grayling aleap in the river,  
The bighorn asleep on the hill.  
The strong life that never knows harness;  
The wilds where the caribou call;  
The freshness, the freedom, the farness -  
O God how I'm stuck on it all.*

*The winter! the brightness that blinds you,  
The white land locked tight as a drum,  
The cold fear that follows and finds you,  
The silence that bludgeons you dumb.  
The snows that are older than history,  
The woods where the weird shadows slant;  
The stillness, the moonlight, the mystery,  
I've bade 'em goodbye – but I can't.*

Devin read on and stopped, amazed. Why, the poet could have been talking about that 'hole in the ground' he called home – the one he kept leaving, but never really left him. He read the rest of the poem quickly, but had reached a decision, he realized. It was time to go home.

So he did. It took him some time to get organized, pack up his few belongings and find the series of flights that would take him back to New York, but he was there 10 days later. He entered the tunnels through one of the lesser entrances in the city, where a man with a suitcase would not attract attention, especially after dark in the spring. It happened to be near a taxi stand in a sector with a lot of old hotels.

Devin slipped in, waved at the sentry and put a finger to his lips. Whoever it was nodded. Devin couldn't see who it was, but at least they knew him. He trudged the long way to the home tunnels, enjoying as he did the thought of greeting the old man, who was undoubtedly still awake, reading. It wasn't late yet.

He walked into Father's chambers and put down his suitcase near the entrance.

Jacob looked up, then stood up in amazement. Devin rushed to him and they embraced. It felt good to feel the old man, he decided. He was older, frailer, but still of some substance.

"And what brings you here, Devin? A lovely surprise, I might add," Father added hastily, as they stood back and examined each other.

Devin smiled wryly.

"You won't believe it, Pop. I was in the Yukon and happened to be reading a book of poems by Robert Service.

"Ah yes," Father stated, when Devin paused to collect his thoughts, "*The Shooting of Dan McGrew*."

"I remember that one," Devin responded. "But the one that 'got' me was another.

He reached into the pocket of his jacket and brought out the old paperback.

"This stanza." Devin read it out.

*'There's a land where the mountains are nameless,  
And the rivers all run God knows where;  
There are lives that are erring and aimless,  
And deaths that just hang by a hair;  
There are hardships that nobody reckons;  
Where are valleys unpeopled and still;  
There's a land – oh, it beckons and beckons  
And I want to go back – and I will,'"*

Father nodded. "*The Spell of the Yukon*", he remarked. "Even though I've never been further north than Scotland, I understand the love for wilderness. I guess you have it, Devin."

Devin nodded in turn. "I do, but I was there almost a year. It was stunning - all those things Service says. But I had to go into a pub to get away from it. It was often too much, too beautiful, if you know what I mean."

"Yes. I felt that way when I first came to America. The big land, the open sky – I did travel a bit, you know, by Greyhound bus, back before it all ... went bad. It was daunting, incredible, humbling. I was actually glad to get back to New York and see people and human-made structures."

The old man looked a little tired, Devin thought, and he reminded himself of the hour.

"Sorry, Pop, I'm keeping you up. I should go and see Vincent."

"I'm afraid you can't, Devin. Vincent is above with Catherine. It's their anniversary, you know."

"Anniversary? Not of their marriage."

"No, the anniversary of the day Vincent found Catherine in the park and brought her below. April 12<sup>th</sup>. The day everything changed – for them as well as us. They celebrate it with light in her apartment, I understand. We down here make sure no one bothers them – or prevents Vincent from going."

Devin nodded and made a decision. "Is there a guest room available? I think I'd like to just wander a bit, see this land of ours again. Somehow, there was never time during my past visits."

"Of course, Devin. The nearby guest chamber is vacant. I'll see you in the morning, no doubt."

Devin gave the old man another short hug, picked up his suitcase and went to the guest room. He stopped only long enough to drop his suitcase there and walked swiftly to the Falls. He had chosen the location without really thinking about it.

He sat on a rocky perch, which had he known it, was where Vincent often sat. He gazed around the immense, now dim, rocky chamber and let his mind soak in the sound of the tumbling water, the isolation. The tunnels were seldom silent, with their pipe chatter and train noises, but this was solitude, yet he knew his kin were nearby, just steps away. That was a comfort. He had missed that in the Yukon, friendly as everyone was. It was different when family were there. Perhaps he wasn't as much of a loner as he imagined.

He opened the book of poetry again and read the last two lines of the poem which had brought him here.

*'It's the beauty that thrills me with wonder,  
It's the stillness that fills me with peace.'*

Here there was nothing built, nothing unnatural, just the raw rock and rushing water, slipping over the tall gorge and flowing away through its own mist, who knew where. Here it was still, eternal, solid – the water merely emphasized, rather than detracted from it. There was no other living thing but himself. Nothing grew here, not even lichen, and no animal ever ventured this far. In all their fishing trips, he and Vincent had never found so much as a minnow.

He was home.

*'Oh but it is good to be  
Foot-loose and heart-free!  
Yet how good it is to come  
Home at last, home, home!*

*(Robert Service – The Rover)*



END