

Intention

by

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(based on Challenge of the Yukon)

www.megaloceros.net/preston.htm

Your father didn't die just so you could follow him, Frank William Preston.

It was shallow, like a lot of graves in the Yukon. A man who died at the wrong time of year couldn't necessarily count on burial at all, unless his corpse was kept in the woodshed against the spring thaw. This one, barely a scratch in the half-frozen soil of the Forty Mile graveyard, relied on stone to keep the wild things out.

He didn't want you following in his footsteps even when he was alive, you know that. Your father's dream was to see this wilderness as civilized as anywhere in Lower Canada. That's what he wanted for you.....

The marker was a decent stone- polished, carved, not rough-chipped like some of the miners' markers. Who'd done the carving, he didn't know. Mother and Father had been well-liked; maybe someone in Forty Mile had known someone in Dawson. Maybe there'd been an arrangement with the government. He didn't know.

There's a university in Victoria. We've been saving every penny possible, whenever there was extra to spare. It's been put aside for you, for proper schooling. You could go there, and learn the law- properly. Not just what a policeman has to know.

There wasn't anywhere to sit nearby, and there wasn't enough room to kneel without getting his feet on someone else's grave. That didn't sit right with him. Neither did standing there, looking down on his father; but there wasn't any help for that.

You're too young to join the Mounties anyway. You won't be seventeen for months. If you send a letter to Victoria now, I'm sure you'll hear from them before then. You don't have to decide until then. Just send them that letter. Find out what it'll take for you to go there and study law. Please, Frank?

He swallowed. Even under the morning sun, the stone was so very cold to the touch.

"Father."

Oh, God, how could he say it? What was there that he could possibly say? How did you make someone understand when they weren't even there any more?

"Father, it- it's me. It's Billy. . . I had to talk to you."

He wondered, a little, what Reverend Snyder would suggest he do. But Reverend Snyder was off riding his circuit, and wouldn't be back for who knew how long.

"I spoke to Mother last night, about my plans. She said you wanted me to go to school in Victoria instead of becoming a Mountie. I- I know you always talked about the law, and justice, and all those things, and I know you wanted me to study hard."

He swallowed again, took his hand from the stone.

"Mother says I'm rushing into things, and that I shouldn't be so quick to decide. That I'm still just a boy. All- all that kind of stuff."

There had been a day in Alberta, years ago when he was little. He'd got into a fight with a much bigger boy about something- he didn't remember what. Just his mother's face after, and waiting in dread for his father to come home. Hiding as his mother whispered to his father, who hadn't even taken off his uniform.

I'm not going to do anything to that other boy, Billy. You can't make anyone behave. No matter how big or how strong you get, you can't make anyone do anything. You can tell them what'll happen if they do something bad, and if they're smart, they'll decide they don't want to do it. But that's not the same thing. If it was, you wouldn't have a bloody lip, would you? I told you not to fight with other boys, but you did anyway.

That had been just about the worst day in the world. He'd wanted to hide under the bed- run away- something. Anything but keep his father's eye. And then his father had sighed, and put one hand on his shoulder, just so.

There's only one person in the whole world you can make do anything, Billy. If you can just keep him doing the right thing, that's what matters most. Everything else comes from making that one person do what's right.

His father had let go of his shoulder then, reached into the tiny wardrobe that his mother had brought all the way from Ottawa- and brought out a mirror.

This is where you'll find him, son. You can't make anyone do anything, not even listen to you, until you can get the man in the mirror to do what's right. Whatever that is, and however hard that might be. Once you do that, everything else will follow.

He closed his eyes.

"You wanted me to learn the law so that I could civilize this place," he said. "You wanted me to be more than just a policeman. But how's the law supposed to keep the people who live here safe if it can't even protect its own men?"

The words came more easily once those first few had been said.

"I'm not going to Victoria, Father. The kind of man who killed you- that kind of man's not afraid of a law book. The only thing that'll stop him is if someone gets between him and whatever he's after. Trying to bring book law up here while the Yukon's still full of men like that won't do any good. That's why I can't go- that's what I have to do. Maybe someday it'll be different. Maybe my son'll be able to go, someday."

It was so very quiet. Even the wind had died away.

"You know, Father..... Mother might've been right about what you wanted for me, and she might even have been right when she said you didn't die just so I could follow you. But she was wrong about something else. Something really important."

He rested his fingers on the stone again.

"I'm not just a boy. I'm a man. . . I have to be."

Finis

(Author's note: According to the radio series, Sergeant Preston's first name was William. He introduces himself as 'Bill Preston' in one episode, and in another he informs a snow-blind criminal that his name is 'Bill'. According to the scripts for the television series, Preston's first name- which was never actually used- was Frank. This was the best reconciliation I could think of for the difference.)