

# Roses from Bolivia by Jeff Wincek

Grampa always tells the best stories. Papa says they're just stories, fairy tales...made up, and I shouldn't pay attention, but sometimes Grampa seems so sure, I can almost see what I think he sees.

"What was it like, back then. Grampa," I ask, and his eyes would kinda look inside, even though he was looking out. "He's looking Past," Papa says when he sees that look, "Looking Past, to the Past," he says. "It's what all the Wasters do. "Walking in the Past." Papa is so mad at Grampa. Mad all the time. Grampa doesn't care, or doesn't see the angry, but I do. "All around us," Grampa'd say, "All around us right here, right where we're standing, as far as the eye could see...it was all golden." "It's still kinda golden," I'd say. "No," he says, "Golden with wheat." And he'd look out over the rolling landscape outside the sand barrier, and I could almost see him seeing something. "From here to the horizon, planted in wheat." I don't know what wheat is. All I know is the little thorn acacias Papa plants to try to make wind breaks to stop the sand. Papa says if we don't stop the sand migration, we'll lose Kansas City. I don't know how we can stop the sand, I think to myself. There's so much of it. Papa showed me a map. He says this desert goes from someplace called Canada to another someplace called Texas. The desert is too big, I know it must be. But I never say that to Papa.

Sometimes, when the dust rolls in, when the billows gather, Grampa goes to the barrier and freezes up, he just stares at the tan clouds boiling towards us. Papa sends me out to fetch Grampa. "I have to cover the seedlings," Papa says, "I have to secure the greenhouses." I run to Grampa. I take him by the hand, and he'll mutter as I pull him to the shelter. "Used-ta' be white," he'd mumble. "What?" I ask. "Clouds. Cool and wet. Taste of fog and dew. I miss the clouds." And I know that's another fairy story, because I've seen clouds. I know that clouds are tan, powdery, dry and gritty, and taste like dirt. And I know we'll be tasting dirt for the whole time we're in the dust shelter. And I know that if I don't get Grampa into the shelter, he'll breathe in too much dust and ruin his lungs again, and it costs a lot of money to buy a new pair. But I pull and I get Grampa into the hole, our home and shelter, and get the door battened down. Grampa removes the rag he had tied around his face, covering his nose, like we all have rags tied around our faces. He blows his nose on the rag, which comes away rusty. Dust, I see, not blood. He tries to swallow, but he can't, not easy. Papa comes in about then. He drags the lock shut behind him, but there's tan powder on Papa's boots and cover-alls.

Grampa asks Papa for some water. He says he has to get the dirt taste out of his mouth. "Taste?" Papa says, "You don't like the taste of that rich Kansas farmland?" Grampa stares down at his feet, at the cement floor and says nothing. This is an argument we've all heard before. "You made that!" And Papa isn't hiding his anger this time. He points to the hatch that's keeping the dust out. "You made that, all of you Wasters made that when you sucked the last

water out of the ground. You poured drinking water on the ground so you could grow your lawns and water your golf courses and fill your swimming pools. You flew strawberries from Chile, roses from Bolivia, just because you wanted them when you wanted them.” What are roses? Fly a Strawberry? How can you fly a strawberry? What’s Bolivia? I put the impossible thoughts aside and rest my hand on Papa’s arm. “Those are fairy stories, Papa. They’re not real.” Papa just looks at me, and there’s so much sadness in his eyes. But what he says is, “I envy you,” and he walks to his desk and opens his lap-top, and I don’t understand. Grampa coughs, so I get a bottle and fill it with water from the condenser. “At least there’s still water in the air,” Grampa says. I don’t know what that means. Water in the air? There’s so much I don’t know.

“What did Papa mean?” I ask Grampa. “What Squirt?” he says. “When Papa said he envied me?” Grampa sighs. I’ve heard him do that before. He calls it a “soul sigh.” He looks at me, and he looks guilty. It’s a look I don’t like seeing. “You’re lucky, Squirt. In a strange way, you’re lucky.” I just look at him, hoping for more. Grampa sees I’m not satisfied. “All this,” and he sweeps the room, the shelter, the hatch door, and somehow, I think he means the whole world outside, “To you, all this is as it should be. To you, this is normal. You’re lucky, because you never knew how it was, and likely will never be again. Your Papa knows what was. He knows what was lost. You’re lucky, because you unlike me, aren’t the reason it’s gone.”

This doesn’t make sense. There’s so much I don’t know. Grampa has that guilty look in his eyes again. I decide to ask him to tell me a fairy story.

“Tell me about roses from Bolivia.”