

fields of gold

by Jeff Swanson

The son stood on the porch with his grip packed. "I'm off to mine me a fortune a gold, Daddy."

"Boy, there's a fortune in gold right here," said the father, indicating the ripe wheat, glowing in early morning sun.

The kid slumped. "Pop, you turn over a rock there, you got yerself ten thousand dollars."

"Ten thousand you ain't worked for. Gold ain't gonna give you the sense you need to handle it rightly."

"Sure, and this burg's runnin with sense. Like ol Doc Groves, what beat his kids, or Mac Hannigan wearin his dead wife's dresses."

Pop set his jaw and looked out at the horizon, where crops of tall clouds ripened in the cornflower blue sky. He shrugged, and gestured to the road. "Well hell, boy, then get movin. You got some years to cover before we see each other again, so get to it."

"Alright, Daddy." hefted his valise and clonked down the porch to the dust of the path.

By degrees, the sky consumed him.

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The gold fields were all the kid imagined. A rough & tumble land of naked greed, jealousy, suspicion and hate -- with islands of the purest tenderness and camaraderie and laughter. You had to have eyes in the backayer head sometimes, or so it seemed. You had to be alert all the time and if you had a piece of claim that you couldn't see all in one glance, you were in trouble. Indians and chinee would sneak up whenever your back was turned. before you knowd it someone staked out a part of your own claim and tried to pretend it away. the kid had never known a more ruthless and unreal way of life.

somehow, SOMEHOW, he managed to take and build, and without spilling very much blood over it. he didn't have to kill a man but men were kilt all around him. a man a day, sometimes, it seemed. fallin on both sides.

finally, his back cracked, his stomach worn fulla holes from worry the kid snuck out in the night with a million-five in his poke, leaving his gear and several thousand in dust behind to cover the scent. He fled from California like the state itself were chasin and the rest of his life he never quite lost that feeling.

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When he returned to Rampike, his daddy was dead. Only ones left was a couple of dimwit cousins and an old lady used to do the washin. Three months after then she died too and there was only the dimwit cousins.

Flocks of shysters and con artists descended on his new lovely house at the end of the main street. One night he left it behind just like his tent in the goldfields, and struck north. He carried a pick on his shoulder and the first place he got to said What's that thing? he threw it down and built a house on that very spot.

In the summer sun, the endless wheatfields of Alberta stretched to the horizon. He married a lady half-indian, had himself a laughing little boy. The boy growed, and one day stood on the porch, grip in hand.

My, don't things come around, thought the man. The boy looked at him with the eyes of his own father, then descended the porch to the dust of the path.

