

A photograph of a forest path. The path is made of dirt and is flanked by tall, thin trees with dense green foliage. In the distance, there is a stone archway or bridge. The overall scene is bright and green, suggesting a summer or spring setting.

**IN CRISIS MODE**

**GORDEN SCHWEERS**

*What she really wants is more. That's the world's mantra.*

Alan Lee Golde B.A.Sc maneuvered the wheels of his Trans Am *Firebird* in to the parking spot marked '*Handicapped*'. The needle on the tachometer froze on high RPMs until he dropped the power down and turned off the ignition. The Pontiac was Golde's latest toy, a black convertible with leather bucket seats and a sweet hunk of fuel injected artillery under the hood. Fridays were the worst days to find a parking spot at the mall which covered over a thousand acres of expropriated farm lands.

Golde clicked his remote to open the glove compartment. Amongst the registration and insurance papers was a generic '*Handicapped*' label which he attached to the rear view mirror. He hadn't pulled off this stunt for a few months. But the lot was packed tight with cars and he was not the least bit inclined to walk from the farthest end of the parking lot. *Time is precious* was the adage he lived by in the fast lane. Others might have

considered him dishonest but he held too high of an opinion of himself to care what anyone else thought. Imbedded in his psyche as a land developer was a cagey survival strategy to gain advantage at any cost. If that meant breaking a few rules along the way, so be it.

Pausing at the glass portico of the south entrance, he surveyed the vista outside the mall with cool headed quiescence. In the distance on all sides, high rises stood shoulder to shoulder like a collection of concrete totems. His firm *Golde, Bernstein & Associates* had been involved in financing and marketing most of those projects. The pace of construction had slumped in recent years yet they still had a minimum of five large developments underway at any given time. Though the urban air was tainted with the aroma of monoxide and other by products of the petroleum industry, the city was being rapidly transformed under the tutelage of entrepreneurs such as Golde, his associates, city hall, and their lawyers. Large tracts of forest and farm lands were being expropriated on a daily basis. Statistics predicted that by the year 2025 all but the wealthiest would live in shoebox apartments high above the streets. At times he imagined himself on a surfboard,

riding a wave of development that would never reach the shoreline.

The inner sanctum of the mall was designed on the principle of the spokes of a wheel. Four entrances on each side of the building led to a central hub on the main floor. Stepping on to the hub's revolving platform, Golde joined hundreds of consumers who were carried around to areas that branched off, providing specialized shopping opportunities. Whereas the others in the mall were enticed to spend money, this trip to see Dr. Kaross was covered by Golde's generous dental insurance. That reason alone was justification for taking time away from his business ventures. In fact, every aspect of his career was covered by some type of insurance. His Trans Am for instance was insured for twice its actual value. His home on The Heights was insured on the Premium Plan, worth more as ashes than as a comfortable family retreat with a full gym, sauna, and a sunken hot tub at the centre of the indoor pool. His health was fully insured against illness or accident. And most of all, his reputation and integrity were assured by a dozen lawyers retained to protect board members from lawsuits. The irony did not escape Golde nor his wife, Vanessa. While his seven figure salary increased with each bonus, his policies against

flood, fire, and mortality climbed incrementally. If any components or organs of his body deteriorated through abuse or genetic mischance, invaluable transplants were available for a small deductible. Golde's professional status was like a shield that became more impregnable with each successful expropriation. Though he tried on occasion to avoid the pitfalls of wealth, his blood stream had been infused with hubris. If they did impound his vehicle (even with his counterfeit sticker in place) he'd sue the bastards just to defend the principal of the matter.

Alan Lee Golde had the swagger and confidence of a man who packed a Colt .45 as he made his way through the crystal palace of shoe stores and boutiques. The Kaross office was located on the third tier of the west rotunda. It may have been a warm July day outside, but in the mall the air was pure and cool, conditioned by a series of large machines perched on the flat roof of *The Largest Shopping Mall in the World*.

In the hub at the head of the third escalator, fashion shows were underway. Young women trying to become the next super model were flaunting down the runways, dressed in outlandish costumes. Golde was distracted for a few seconds, only to

recollect he had an appointment at 3 pm sharp.

*Punctuality* was his other outstanding trait.

Walking along the polished floors of another aisle, he passed show windows filled with leather goods, jewelry and watches, men's and women's clothes on unisex manikins, athletic and sporting goods, optometrist displays, and tanning salons. A few windows were splashed with fantastic discounts to Club Med destinations, with signs displaying palm trees, white sand beaches, and bikinis.

Golde paused at the carpeted entry to Dr. Karros' dental establishment, noting that he was within two minutes of his appointment. Not bad, he said to himself, considering the traffic on a Friday. The receptionist glanced up the moment a client stepped in to the red broadloom office area at the front desk and said-

-Mr. Golde, you're on time! Good afternoon.

-I always come on time, he told her in a flat tone.

The receptionist laughed and asked-

-How's Katey doing?

-Just fine, Susanna, he said, coming to the counter and resting his elbow across it, absently looking

back at the flow of shoppers passing the open office front.

-I heard she quit Amherst after a year there, said the receptionist. Wasn't it a good place after all?

Golde sized up the young woman who had been in the same graduating class as his daughter and wondered how much of his family's private lives she actually knew. He decided she knew nothing and he would keep it that way.

-It was great, really, but not enough specialization for her. We visited her last Christmas. Impressive place. But she'll have better opportunities at Smith.

-Yes, of course, Susanna agreed, amazed that Mr. Golde could still remember her name after almost two years. We were all impressed when she got the scholarship. She's a smart gal, there's no contest on that one.

-You are too, he rejoined.

Golde enjoyed flattering pretty young women. Though he had a daughter and son in college, it confirmed he was still virile, with everything going for him, and above all, consistently attractive to the opposite gender. The secretary blushed as Golde

smiled down at her, winking at the same time. From the back partition of the office another woman wearing a facial mask hanging around her neck indicated that she was ready for her next patient. Once again, Golde addressed the dental hygienist by her first name. He hung up his suede jersey and slipped in to the articulated recliner. The office was filled with the most advanced technological equipment available to the dental profession. His dental x-ray was displayed in front of him on an overhead screen. He leaned back and opened his mouth, trying to answer questions in an intelligible manner. The hygienist picked away at his molars and gum line with a sharp tool.

-What's this here? Her probe touched something in the back of his mouth. For a moment they exchanged a look and then she asked again-

-Do you have any pain there? He shook his head. The hygienist probed deeper and Golde recoiled. In fact he had been concerned for the last two weeks by a small growth that had developed in the back of his mouth. The woman consulted his chart and began to scan his teeth in the area where the growth had appeared.

-Is there a problem, he asked.

-It's not cancerous, she said, to reassure him. Golde thought in a panic, *What the hell is she saying? What's not - cancerous?*

She moved a portable cone towards his cheek and told him she was taking a few x-rays of the area. Golde's mind ran down the list of obligations and appointments he had left at the office and on the coming weekend with Vanessa. Beep, the machine took an impression of the area, and again, Beep, Beep, another two impressions at different angles. The cone was swung to the left of his cheek and again the machine took an impression of the areas, penetrating his flesh as if it was transparent. On the screen behind the hygienist, one image appeared that was darker than the surrounding areas.

Dr. Kaross came in to the office, greeting Golde as a friend and peer.

-How's Alan doing these days, he asked.

-Just fine. Considering you keep hiring younger and younger women.

-I'm surprised you noticed, he said.

The hygienist interrupted, indicating the image on the screen. Both professionals were silent for a moment. Kaross asked:

-How did this happen?

The woman apologized,

- I don't know.

-Is there a problem, Golde queried. He was partially supine in the dental chair, fully relaxed, fighting a strange sense of ennui. He had no idea he was this tired until the opportunity came to relax. The dentist wheeled up to him on a stool to begin the examination.

-You have health insurance, don't you, Alan?

- Just what is that suppose to mean?

The doctor tapped him on the lower chin to have him open his mouth as wide as possible. He peered down his mouth with a strong light attached to a head band.

-This is a first for me in thirty years. Your back teeth have rotted out under the gum line. The dentist leaned back, looking at the x-ray on the monitor.

-Can I sue, asked Golde.

-You can go to hell, the doctor said to his golfing associate. Look, this has to be attended to as soon as possible.

Kaross glanced at his watch before looking at the calendar on the wall. It's late and the weekend is coming up, he said. Nothing could have been more poorly timed than this.

The hygienist tried to apologize but Kaross cut her short, saying:

-You'll know for next time. Let's get this one solved quickly.

-Jim, what do you mean - '*solve this quickly*', asked Golde, concerned that something *cancerous* had been located in his mouth. Kaross tapped the hygienist on the arm, indicating that she should leave the room for a few moments while he talked privately to his patient.

The two of them, Golde noted, had been working together for a few years. Though they were dedicated to their professionalism as a dental team, Golde suspected that his friend was cheating on Clare, his wife, by having an affair on the side after work. Kaross looked back in his mouth, restricting

his ability to ask questions. While Golde's mouth was open, the dentist said:

-So what has happened here is that you have wisdom teeth that never broke the surface.

He indicated the x-rayed area on the portable screen.

-Instead they have impacted (and rotted) below the gum line. If we don't get them out quickly they could infect the surrounding tissue and bone and cause you a great deal of trouble.

Golde eyed the doctor carefully as he explained the situation in nonclinical jargon.

-I'll have Susanna make you an appointment as soon as possible at Eagle Hill Hospital.

Golde's eyes darted at the mention of going in to a hospital. The doctor said:

-Not to worry, old boy. It's just a day procedure. You'll undoubtedly be in pain once the anesthetic wears off but you have the whole weekend to recover.

Kaross tapped him on the arm and smiled, giving him a thumbs-up. Golde brushed off the reassurance.

-Hold on, he said. This is going too fast. Why can't you just pull out the suckers here and now, and save me a trip to the hospital?

Kaross wheeled the monitor over to the chair and slanted it so that his patient could see the image for himself.

-You see this, Alan, he said, pointing to the dark area on the screen. This black area means that it's attached itself to part of your gum line and perhaps your bone cavity too. The good news is that the infection found its way out in to your gum line rather than infecting the surrounding bone mass. That's the good news, if there is any. The bad news is that we need to get those little bastards out as soon as we can find a surgeon who is willing to do it for you, either tonight (which I don't recommend) or on Saturday.

-I'm not in any pain, Golde countered.

-You will be, and soon, said Kaross.

The dentist left the room for a moment and gave instructions to his receptionist to call the hospital. Golde heard him tell her to ask a Dr. Lavossier for a favour for a good friend. In a few minutes, during which Kaross talked directly to the surgeon on the

phone, his appointment was confirmed. Tomorrow, at 9 am, Golde would be wheeled in on a stretcher and operated on by Kaross' associate, Dr.

Lavossier. -This surgeon is the best around, said Kaross when he came back to the dental chair. It means you have to get Vanessa to drive you over there in the morning and then back again after the operation.

-I wasn't planning on being in the hospital on the weekend.

Golde wanted to sprint back to his Trans Am and roar out of the '*handicapped*' parking area, racing as far away from this problem as possible.

-Well, Kaross said, none of us are but its only day surgery and you should be ready for work next Monday. He patted Golde on the arm. Sorry, old boy, but ever so often a few things slip by us and this is one of them.

-Sure, said Golde. I'll be back on my feet for the tournament that's coming up and that's all that matters.

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In his *Firebird*, wheeling through lanes of traffic, Golde called his wife on his cell and broke the

news: their fling down to Seattle this weekend was on hold until his health problem was concluded.

-What are you talking about, she almost shouted in to the phone, what surgery?

Golde tried to explain it all over again but gave up when he shot through a yellow light on the overpass. He clicked the phone closed and slipped it in to his jacket pocket. He suddenly realized that he had to cancel at least four engagements, along with disappointing Vanessa. The trip to Seattle included meeting with other developers in a dinner engagement on Saturday night, so an apology was in order there. Seagram would have to take his place even though it pissed him off to no end, thinking that he was being one upped by a subordinate colleague. It was the same on Sunday. He had to meet several city councilors at the development site and sell them on the expansion of the project. That one couldn't fall through either. Big money was riding on each strategy moving forward as a coordinated part of a larger agenda. Golde ran his tongue over the small nub of hard flesh that had suddenly changed his whole routine. *Saturday at 9 am. Eagle Hill Hospital. Dr. Lavossier.* He'd make sure he made love that night

to Vanessa, just in case things went terribly wrong on the operating table.

-Just drop me off, okay, he said to his wife when they approached the hospital that next morning.

-What time should I come back for you, she asked.

-I'll call you, he said, holding his cell phone in his hand like a talisman. He expected to be in the hospital for 2 hours but did not know what to expect. At the emergency entrance, signs were posted everywhere it seemed, telling people what to do, and not what to do, and who was responsible; and who was legally responsible. Meanwhile ambulances raced in and out of the rotunda.

Funny, thought Golde, how things can change from one moment to the next. He had been as buoyant as helium, just last night. This next morning he was alone, on edge and apprehensive. He should have insisted that Vanessa stay with him in the hospital but he didn't want her to watch him sweat under threat. But now that he was approaching the edge of an abyss, he wanted her support nearby. *Not just in health when things were going very well, but in sickness too!* It was too late. If she really loved him, and wasn't just

using him all of the time, he hoped she would have insisted:

– No matter what you say, I’m coming in there with you, Alan!

Golde was angry, at her and at himself, for not insisting she stand by him when he really needed her. Tough guys have the hardest time asking for emotional support.

In the admitting area, he was given a plastic bracelet with his medical history encoded on it. He enjoyed bantering with the receptionist since he felt most at ease when he was testing that boundary, and the young women too, it seemed, enjoyed the attention. The waiting lounge was an open section with chairs and magazines scattered on a coffee table. Golde took a copy of GOOD HOUSEKEEPING and pretended to read it, watching the procession of bizarre people who passed through the corridor or who came to sit in the same area. One man appeared to be in exceptional pain, and was moaning and tossing himself around on a chair. His wife was seated next to him, smiling as he suffered. Finally, Golde asked:

-Is there something wrong with your –ah-husband?

The woman smirked and said:

-Looks like his vasectomy didn't work out like he intended.

She tried to prevent herself from laughing aloud. The young man gasped for breath, whimpering and moving from place to place, until he was called to enter the hospital area. Golde shook his own head. This wasn't his privately run clinic. Rather it was the one that was open to him for the operation. In one corner, another man was in a wheel chair. His clothing was dirty and worn, and he sat with his head down, in a deep slumber from an illness or drugs. People in hospital beds were wheeled through the corridor, their intravenous bottles dangling from hangers attached to their beds. Another woman was in a wheel chair, having put a needle through one of her fingers while sewing on a machine. She was sitting wrapped in her homemade fabrics and brocades, waiting patiently for a doctor to see her.

-Are you in pain, Golde asked.

The woman smiled back at him but said nothing in return. Minutes later, several stretchers from the ambulances raced past the waiting area, attended by several interns and nurses. In the midst of the

pandemonium of the emergency, a young woman in a floral dress rushed out of one of the swinging doors, and took a chart from a desk. She wasn't dressed in the customary hospital apparel except for the fact she had a stethoscope hanging around her neck. From across the aisle, Golde admired her turn of ankle and made positive eye contact with her. For a moment, even from a distance, she was arrested by his uninvited stare. Their eye contact lasted a split second. With a chart in her hand, she returned to the ward and the doors swung closed behind her.

Meanwhile, around him, the circus of emergencies and admissions continued until his name was called on the loudspeaker. At the main desk, he was sent down to the area where his operation would take place. A young man who introduced himself as the anesthesiologist ran through the procedure, inserting a needle in to a blue vein of his arm that would meter a strong sedative in to his blood stream while the operation was underway. Golde stripped down and was left in a green smock that tied in the back. His bare knees resembled the bald heads of old men.

The process of relinquishing his identity was undertaken in decisive increments. His wallet with

all of his identification and charge cards was left in the locker room along with his cell phone as his last connection to the outside world. For shoes, he was given booties with elastic tops. His hair was swept under a skull cap. He pulled the curtain aside when he was finished changing in to the hospital garb. In front of him was the table they had assigned to him for his dental surgery. The young anesthesiologist was again at his side, helping him on to the bed as if he was a feeble old man. As soon as he laid his head down, Golde had the strangest impulse to sleep forever. He was more tired than he had ever admitted to himself, running on the same low battery for several years now, convinced he had the best life possible. It took this small bout with ill health to separate him from the adrenalin of his sybaritic distractions. In place of a supporting wife, a sceptre of fatigue appeared at his bedside.

Golde didn't understand why but he was in a cold sweat when his bed was wheeled in to the operating theatre. The medical team surrounded him at once. The woman whom he had visually pawed with the stethoscope around her neck was at his side, introducing herself with a French accent as Dr. Lavossier.

-No, wait, said Golde in a panic. You are supposed to be a man!

-Why would I ever want to be that, she asked him, putting a mask over her mouth such that her eyes laughed at him.

-Jim -Dr. Kaross- said you were his associate. It's just that..... Golde was getting confused.

-Dr. Kaross put me through dental and medical school. He's a fabulous person, no?

-Yes, of course, I didn't mean to imply...

The medical staff stood around his table looking down at him. The doctor remembered him eyeing her as if she was a harlot when he didn't know she was going to be his surgeon. This was going to be the best surgery she had ever performed. But it had turned in to a dark comedy for Golde. He was in a dead beat hospital, surrounded by a bunch of amateurs rather than fully trained professionals. Panic set in at the last second. He asked the doctor with her dark eyebrows tattooed in place:

-Have you ever performed this surgery before?

It was too late. The anesthetic had taken hold of his mind and was casting a net across his nervous

system, shutting down his consciousness. He heard the doctor's soft French accent in the distance:

-There's a first time for everything, foorr everythinng, foor evverrrthhhing...

Golde closed his eyes and the operation to extract his rotten wisdom teeth was underway. The medical team talked casually as the extraction proceeded. Golde's heart beat was monitored on a screen, watched carefully by the anesthesiologist who had participated in hundreds of operations for every type of procedure until he was inured to everything but the demands of keeping the patients sedated and out of the reach of conscious suffering.

*Golde decided to get up off of the operating table and watch the operation as one of the medical team. With an effortless impulse his varua rose up off the table, as light as air, and stood back looking at his body. His head was swept back and his mouth held open with several clamps so that the operation could proceed easily and quickly. Tubes had been stuffed down his nose to assist with his regular breathing. In the next second, he wanted to wander further away. There was no reason to do so but he wanted to be outside. He'd return soon enough. Something was waiting for him on the other side of the cinder brick wall and*

*so he stepped straight through to the outside of the building. Instead of a parking lot and grass around the hospital, Golde found himself on a long dirt road with trees on one side breaking apart the sunlight and a wall of stones on the other. He stared down the road, half expecting to meet someone. The road was overgrown with weeds and a few gold leaves of fall lay scattered upon the ground at his feet. His varua had taken him to a place his mind struggled to recognize but could not comprehend. He had to return! Turning, he floated back through the wall and to the operating theatre.*

*They had extracted his first impacted tooth and were operating on the second. The first black tooth had been discarded in a bucket and Golde stood looking down at it. Dr. Lavossier was sweating with concentration, an expert medical professional. With the second extraction, the conversation around the table turned to the next patient and surgery. The open wounds in his mouth were disinfected and sutured closed. Golde slipped back in to his body once again and fell in to a deep coma.*

Vanessa was at his side when he awoke in a bed surrounded by loose hanging curtains. His jaws

ached as the medication slowly retreated. An intern in green appeared, checking his condition, and giving him a few white pills to deaden the pain for the next few hours. His wife asked him-

-Are you okay?

Golde nodded. How long have you been waiting?

-Not long. I did my shopping and then didn't wait for your call, she said, realizing it would have been impossible for him to phone after his surgery. She had called the front desk for an approximate time to return. When she tried to show him the things she had bought he brushed them aside. Vanessa was taken by surprise:

-How do you feel?

Golde thought back to the operation. For a moment there was only a void of time. Then he remembered stepping out of his body and through the wall in to another world.

There was a wall, he said slowly, describing his experience. And a path – and trees. It was about noon, on a sunny day in autumn.

-I think you better stay in bed for a little longer, Vanessa said. You're talking nonsense, honey.

-It's okay, he assured her. I saw the whole thing – even my own operation.

Vanessa felt his head with the back of her hand. He wasn't running a fever. He did however look rather foolish with his hair hidden under a tight cap. It made him look like an impish child with a wrinkled face. But he persisted about the wall, the path, the trees. Vanessa was getting uncomfortable. She had been looking forward to a trip to Seattle that weekend, meeting some of the high powered potentates of the American establishment. Instead her escort was lying on a hospital bed babbling as if he had dementia.

-Please, Alan, honey, she said, looking at her watch. I'm over parked. If you feel up to it, you can get dressed and come out to the car. Then she thought better of leaving him alone:

- I'll help you with your stuff.

Golde glared at his wife. Though he loved her in every way possible he was exasperated by her craving to always need and receive more attention. Now however she was blocking the expression of his most profound and recent experience. Damn her! He resented such blind obstinacy in a woman. If she would just shut up and listen, he'd tell her

how he had gotten up off the operating table while the whole thing was going on. He began lecturing her in a louder voice:

-It's not nonsense. All day long we walk around in decaying bodies but when we die, we'll be able to get up and walk away free as birds. Listen, Vanessa, I'll tell you just what happened....

She was embarrassed. Her face flushed and she looked down at the floor. A wall of cloth was all that separated them from patients in nearby beds and the staff working in the ward. Golde's eyes flooded with anger against the woman he had been married to for the last thirty years. Socially, they were the new aristocracy and lived in the most exclusive part of the city. Their children had all of the advantages and goals that money could provide for them. Vanessa was in all of the right auxiliaries and on several important boards. She was well dressed and well spoken. Her husband was scaling up to the top of the 2% echelon, the founder of his own development agency. Suddenly none of those achievements seemed to matter. What pissed him off as he lay in a flimsy hospital gown was the fact that his wife was uncomfortable at what a bunch of strangers might think of him. But Vanessa was right. He was over his head. Not only could he not

talk to his wife about his near death experience, none of his business associates would tolerate that calibre of conversation either. Golde had built up over the years such thick camouflage that he had no one who'd accept his account without showing scepticism.

Vanessa went around to the other side of the bed and looked at him directly.

- Please, she pleaded, just wait for an hour or two until the medication they've given you has worn off.

-Why is that, he asked. Are you afraid of something? Something that might upset the pampered life you lead, Golde demanded, publically insulting his wife.

The curtain was swept aside and Dr. Lavossier entered the bed stall. She asked:

- Is there something wrong?

-Yes, said Vanessa in her own defence. Alan claims to have seen *A Vision of Calvary* while under the anesthetic.

The doctor smiled in a manner that needed no translation. She was back in her floral dress. Her

rank was defined by the stethoscope dangling from around her neck. She asked Golde:

-What happened?

Golde explained his near death experience to her, describing the operating room in detail. Further, he described how they were positioned at different stages of the extraction, and of the clamp they had inserted in his mouth to keep it open. The doctor looked up at his wife and nodded. He was correct. She said:

-This only happens to a very few of our patients. Perhaps only one or two out of thousands. Then she said to Golde:

-Don't be upset by this. You need to slow down it seems. As your surgeon, I'm seeing the symptoms of an early heart attack.

-I don't think so, said Golde.

-I *do* think so, insisted the French doctor. *Mais Oui-not-Non*. We were the ones listening to your heart bouncing around on the monitor. You have an irregular heartbeat, Mr. Golde. You need a very complete check-up and very soon. Just be glad you were able to come back again to your body after

floating around, she said, waving her hand in the air. She tapped Golde on the chest and said, again:

-Bad heart, Monsieur. Time to get a complete check-up.

Then the young doctor was gone, pulling the curtain back as his wife called to her – Thank you, doctor.

Golde was really pissed. First his wife discounted his experience and now the smart ass young fe fe who had experimented on him in surgery had written off his experience to a bad heart condition. It was time to leave the hospital. Vanessa found his clothes for him and he began to re-create his real identity. His wallet was still in his pants and his cell phone in his coat pocket. No sooner had he left the hospital bed than it was stripped down to bare sheets by staff in blue uniforms. Vanessa ran ahead to get the car from the parking lot and pick him up at the front entrance. For a few minutes he was left alone, staring up at the noon day sun. Golde looked around at the hospital grounds in amazement and then shouted aloud:

- My God!

As if struck by lightning he understood what his *varua* had shown him while he was in a coma. Instead of getting in the car, he insisted Vanessa leave it parked and come with him. She refused but he insisted, ignoring her frustration. They stared at each other, she in anger and he in resolve, until she turned off the ignition and followed him to a far corner of the hospital grounds.

This is it, he claimed as if enraptured. This is where the road was. He pointed to a small island in the parking lot.

-And that tree there, it hasn't been knocked down. This is incredible! I can't believe it.

-Are you sure, his wife asked him.

-Yes, yes, he insisted. The dilapidated farm land upon which the hospital had been built had been all but eradicated. The past had been plundered, wiped from the face of the earth by modern machinery, blueprints, and men such as Allan Lee Golde.

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Thirty-five years earlier, Golde's Norco ten speed allowed him to explore the outer limits of the city. One summer day, when half a million of his generation had gathered on Max Yasgur's farm in

Woodstock, New York, Golde was alone and following the steel tracks of a railroad skirting the far end of an inlet. Nothing but maples and cottonwoods occupied the valley in those days. The mountainsides were covered in an evergreen canopy of old growth cedars. After a locomotive forced him to step aside and wait, shaking the earth under his feet with its tonnage, Golde had seen for the first time the incision of a logging road snaking up through the forest on the far side of the inlet. It was late in the afternoon and he still had a long way to peddle home.

Soon, Golde was back in high school, participating in theatre, gym, and basketball tournaments. Yet the impulse to wander through the city on his bicycle nagged at him. It was during an exam in history class that he remembered seeing the road. He went back. At first locating the logging road proved difficult but from the railroad tracks the thin scar on the mountain was again visible. The cool nights of autumn had made a pathway through the cedar forest, leaving the alders in flame. Golde had no idea where the road would lead after he stashed his bicycle in the woods and proceeded up the side of the mountain on a gravel road full of potholes. Shortly, however, he found another road leading like a tangent in to an abandoned farm.

At the entrance, no tattered sign nailed to a tree stated 'Trespassers Will Be Prosecuted'. Along one side of a dirt road, a wall had been painstakingly built one stone at a time as a border around the entire circumference of forty acres. The dirt roadway meandered under a canopy of branches until it came to a main gate that wasn't latched. Gold pushed a broken gate open with one hand and stood looking in all directions, expecting a voice to hail him at any moment. A few birds and the wind made faint sounds but otherwise there was silence. The boy stepped quietly and carefully in to a sanctuary in the forest.

In the farthest corner of the property, behind another stone enclosure, the limbs of fruit trees were covered in moss and green cobwebs. Golde wandered around the farm, inspecting the rusted machinery and broken wheels of a wagon, finding vines of grapes that had gone wild and large wooden bins for compost which had decayed and fallen apart. With his back against one of the malformed apple trees, Golde slept for a few minutes or an hour. The sun was pouring down its benediction to the world when he awoke in a lost paradise. Mist rose from the damp earth and danced like spirits before vanishing once again.

Golde brushed off his coat and pants. It was time to return to the hustle of the city. Still - he was baffled how it was possible for the farm people to disappear, relinquishing decades of hard work and independence. That question was intuited in an instant by his lessons in modern history. For a moment in the sunshine, he imagined the protests of the farmer and his family as the state militia dragged them away to concentration camps. Though he distained that impression, it was what he was learning in school about how the modern world worked.

Before leaving at the gate, he noticed an old building leaning on the southern edge of the property. Weathered boards were missing from its walls and roof. But when he inspected the barn, bales of green alfalfa had been stacked under a plastic tarp and there were prints in the mud from shod horses. From a small corral behind the barn, a pony neighed, alarmed by his presence. Golde had enough horse sense to call out in a calm voice, reassuring the animal he was not a predator.

So, Golde thought, people are here, bordering their horses! A productive farm had become a barb wired pasture for a few people. His admiration for those who had built the walls one stone at a time

and planted the fruit trees as saplings was supplanted by his concern that he was trespassing on the hussars of the modern world. The sacred right of private property was his second lesson in school.

On the way back down the mountainside, Golde was startled to see a horse and rider approaching on the same road, coming in the opposite direction. The horse was a tall chestnut. A young woman with long coil of hair seemed a child in comparison to the size of the horse. She reined in and stopped abruptly. Golde stopped too, and raised his hand in salutation, calling out to the rider. The horse came slowly closer to him. The young woman said hello in response and asked:

-What are you doing here alone?

-Just hiking, he replied. Is this one of the horses from the farm up here?

-You've been to the farm? Do you go there often, she asked.

-Just this once. Do you know who built the farm?

The horse woman told him quickly that the farm was built by Japanese people but they had been

taken away during the Second World War. *So it was true*, he thought.

-Am I trespassing, he asked her again, when I come here?

-No, you're okay. It's the developers I can't stand.

Golde asked:

- Who are they? What do they want?

Developers, she told him, were coming on to the farm on a regular basis, looking for the owners of the land.

They succeeded in locating the owners. The next time Golde went to visit the farm, a long straight swath had been bulldozed through the area. The stone walls were gone. The area was undergoing an irreversible transformation.

\*

Vanessa got back in to the Mercedes and sat watching her husband through the windshield as he walked around the parking lot, acting as if he could actually see the walls and trees all over again. He was pacing out the property around the hospital, trying to locate the place where the orchard stood, and the old wagon. Frequently he would look up in

to the sun for his bearing. He had attracted the attention of one of the security guards. She started the car when he passed near her, and called-

-I'm leaving even if you aren't!

Golde got in to the Mercedes. Vanessa raced out on to the street, hardly considering the flow of oncoming traffic. She asked-

-Have you gone crazy or what?

-I'm fine, he said. It's just that...

He stopped talking and looked at her, not knowing what to say. To get home, they had to drive across the Second Narrows Bridge. They would be together in the car for at least thirty minutes. Golde sat in silence for a longer time than he usually took to formulate his thoughts until he said:

-I wonder what would have happened if I hadn't have gotten back in to my body after the operation?

-You're talking nonsense, Vanessa repeated, switching lanes and accelerating as she sped through the tunnel that lead under another highway and out to the entrance of the six lane bridge.

-I mean - I wonder if I could have stayed on that farm, indefinitely, he said.

-The farm doesn't exist, she said, glancing at him. It got buried under the hospital.

-Sure, said Golde. But I saw it. It existed in my past and I walked right back there. Maybe if we can go back in time, I'd meet you there as a young woman again.

-Don't bother, Alan, she said. Dr. Lavossier said you have a bad heart.

-Screw the doctor. There's a reason why I saw that farm. So what if it got buried under tons of concrete and asphalt. It was still there. That place was so peaceful, Vanessa, when I was a kid. It wasn't like any other place I've been to in my life, ever. And look what we did to those people. They were the salt of the earth. He closed his fist as if he was holding a handful of rich humus. We stole their property and imprisoned them. Instead of learning from them, we drag them away and make criminals out of them. We're the criminals, Vanessa: People like you and me!

Vanessa switched over to the express lane since she was not alone in the car and said:

-Just be glad the hospital was there when you needed it.

Golde watched her as she talked to him, simultaneously checking for advantages in both of her rear view mirrors. She could do several unrelated tasks at any given time. He admired and loved her for that ability. It wasn't anything she could control consciously. But for most of their married life, she had been candidly waiting for a chink to appear in her husband's armour. She sensed the expediency and took a decisive thrust-

-Alan, I want a divorce!

-So you can hook up with Seagram, he asked. Vanessa glanced over with a look of surprise. They were hurtling through space at 145 kilometres, at the apex of the bridge, with a view of the mountains and inlet. Ships were getting loaded with yellow sulphur, wheat, and containers.

-Or if not Seagram then how about that Dupery fellow you spent the weekend with while I was down in Arizona attending the seminar? Vanessa would normally have argued against him but she was determined to end the relationship. She said-

-I don't like people spying on me.

-I wasn't spying, he said. She looked at him for a few seconds, before changing lanes again, refusing to touch the brakes as the Mercedes accelerated down the other side of the bridge. She was racing towards the illusion of a finish line. He continued, with nothing to lose:

-Katey told me.

-Is that why you were so willing to pay for her abortion?

-Partly, he confirmed. But what does my little girl have to say for herself?

-Nothing. I want a divorce. That's final.

Golde thought, *What she really wants is more. That's the world's mantra.*

His mind went back to the implications of his near death experience. It was apparent as never before that if he did have a heart attack on the operating table, Vanessa would have moved on in her life, revelling in the freedom that fell in to her hands with his demise. But he had survived. The shock was his link to a midlife crisis that would herald his transformation. There was no turning back. A day earlier, he could never have anticipated that the hint of cancer would cost him his marriage -

though that marriage was as much of an illusion as the abandoned farm. And then there was the function of *Golde, Bernstein & Associates*. Their goal was the rapacious expropriation of farm and tenured forest lands for development. Golde couldn't continue in that direction either. The divorce was going to be the easiest part of his transition. The wave he had ridden for most of his adult life had reached its final destination.

-I won't contest the divorce, he conceded.

-Good, she said. We'll sell the house and liquidate all of your capital assets. My lawyer says I have a legal right to half of everything.

-Half of nothing, he said. She glanced at him, to confirm that he was serious.

-It's worthless, Vanessa. You're counting on being alive and well for an indefinite time and it's not so.

-Once it's over, I'll feel like I am alive again, after wasting 30 years of my life in a useless marriage.

Golde had to stop thinking. The pain killers were wearing off. His heart was beating against his chest, attempting to find an escape. Perhaps what the French surgeon had said was true. He needed a complete check-up to confirm his heart condition.

Once back at their palatial home, Golde swallowed a handful of pain killers and sleeping pills. In his dream, his chest pain was excruciating until he decided to challenge the wall that had appeared before him. It was solid and he could not move through it as before. Instead he was forced to scale it, moving from stone to stone, until he was over the wall and back at the farm again. Fog had settled over the fields. The old wagon lay rotting near the orchard. Shrouded in the distance, a rider came forward on a black horse. Riding side saddle, the figure belonged to a woman wearing a velvet cape that covered her body and head. Each time Golde approached, the horse paced further away. His heart was palpitating by the time he managed to grab hold of the woman's iron stirrup. Though he addressed her as his *Vanessa*, the rider turned and looked down at him with a face that had no features.

Golde awoke after a ten hour sleep. His head ached as if he had lost a boxing match. Worse, he had to go ahead with a divorce and all of its painful consequences. Afterwards, he'd shave his head and go on a pilgrimage to an ashram in India.