

The Planskis' Pond of Gold

By M. Stefan Strozier

The Hartfords were good friends of the Planskis. Jim Hartford was a tall man, recently turned 30. He had blonde hair and blue eyes and looked a bit like a California surfer. But Jim had never touched a surfboard in his life – far cry. No, Jim was senior vice-president of Medio Cre Industries, which had its footprint in over twenty countries, globally. Jim's second wife, Susan, was five years younger than he and a fairly attractive brunette, if not a bit average.

Last month, the Hartfords bought a home three miles from the Planski's. Jim's house had an indoor pool, a tennis court, a small park, and a spa. The rooms all had high ceilings; the walls were made with off-white plaster; the floors were hardwoods. The kitchen floor was tiled with reddish-cream feldspar granite, mostly absent of biotite mica, while the surfaces were granite, heavy with green peridotite.

The Planski's house was a carbon copy of the Hartfords' – except, the Planski's kitchen was tiled throughout with dark diorite. The same contractor had built both houses and had been highly recommended to Jim by Joe Planski.

On this lazy, winter afternoon, Kari Planski and her husband Joe were having the Hartfords and the Robinsons over for a potluck. The food had been warm soups, mashed potatoes, hot dogs and burgers (Joe cooked those on his indoor/outdoor grill, in the kitchen). The kids were all outside, playing near the back porch.

The men sat at the circular kitchen table, as the women were milling about. The conversation was skirting around in search of a topic, when Tom suddenly suggested they open a bottle of wine. All agreed. Kari took out a bottle of Turning Leaf merlot from the fridge. She was short, had long black hair, and was very attractive. The men had an understanding. Jim Hartford's second wife, Susan, got everyone a glass from the cabinet. The bottle was emptied in short order. Kari tossed it in the trash by the fridge.

The women stopped their heavy-duty roving, and began holding their glasses in their hands in front of them, raised slightly, while they were leaning against the kitchen counter tops; and, sipping their wine, they paid attention to the men. The women leaned and chatted; and, they occasionally changed positions, in order to obtain better positions to observe the men, which they kept referring to, in their abstract conversation. Martha Robinson was a black person; she was married to Tom Robinson, who was white. Everyone was white, except Martha. Tom was a bit of a "rebel", and perhaps a closet homosexual, as well as one-quarter Jewish.

The women's conversation:

"Do you actually enjoy full facials?"

"I do not love the color pink, anymore, the way I used to love it."

"This wine is very ordinary; the sunset was pink today."

"Jim has a moustache now – have you noticed?"

The men began talking about "serious" subjects, such as sports and vehicles. Jim brought up the issue of Tom's deserving, year-end bonus. Jim said first thing Monday he'd see what he could do about it. Joe saw the wisdom in that. Tom was nothing short

of stunned, if not a bit jealous. The comment was strong and lingered for damn near a full minute after it was uttered.

The women had heard it, sure enough; and, they were all impressed by Jim's pull at the company.

Soon, a second bottle of Turning Leaf was opened. Kari came around and poured wine into glasses. She placed the bottle in the trash. The conversation turned dark; single voices soliloquized; the children's voices faded in the distant, cold, thin air.

At this point, Martha Robinson went to check on the kids. There was a lull. It was discovered all glasses were again empty. So, Kari took out the third, and last, bottle from the fridge and dispensed more wine. Quietly, everyone accepted a ration. Kari filled the last glass for the ghost of Martha. Then, she gave the empty bottle a risqué fling into the plastic garbage pail. The thick bottle hit the side of the fridge with a metallic thud; but luckily banged off the plastic rim of the trash container and fell. The bottle hit the other two bottles inside, clanged around, but nothing broke. Alarmed, everyone looked over, but still, there was silence. The nervous quiet was heavy, oppressive. Finally, from the kitchen, Kari turned around and stated, "I don't think Jim has seen our Pond of Gold."

"What?" Jim said, mystified.

Kari continued in a perceptible slur, "You mean, you've never heard about the Pond of Gold?"

"I sure haven't," Jim said, becoming quickly irritated, thinking he might be the brunt of a joke. He said, "What is a Pond of Gold?"

Just then, in through the back door, walked Martha, covered with snow. Everyone wheeled from Kari to look at her as she slammed the door, wham! She stomped her feet twice, neatly: left, right, left, right. Joe quietly admired the military precision and crispness of Martha's movements, which reminded him of his 4-year stint in the U. S. Air Force, in which he rose to the rank of staff sergeant and served in Germany. It created two circles of snow inside of a third, wider circle, which originated from Martha's torso. Spotting her full glass of wine on the counter, she headed straight for it. They all watched her cross, pick up her glass, smile at Kari, mouth a 'thank you', and take a large sip. She set her glass down on the counter with a double clink on the dark diorite. Finally, she said, askance, "what's wrong?"

"How are the kids?" Tom asked.

"Oh, they're fine. They're skating on the Pond of Gold," Martha said and finished her glass with a second sip. She carefully placed it in the sink, on its side.

"All right, look here," Jim Hartford shot in, mad as he could be at his committee meetings, "I think I've heard enough of this damn joke! Okay? I know, get the new guy a little tipsy and start talking about a "pond of gold" somewhere in the snowy trees. The joke is over, now!"

Susan said gently from the kitchen, "Honey, why don't we go and see the Planski's Pond of Gold for ourselves?"

"Oh, that's a damn fine idea!"

Jim rose and walked to the door. He was angry because he sensed they were not BS-ing him. He grasped the solid brass doorknob, turned, faced everyone; and, said, “Take me to the Pond of Gold where my children are ice skating – or, metal skating!”

Jim opened the door. The cold air rushed in. Jim held the door open on purpose and demanded, “Move it!”

The group could not argue with this man. They quickly busied themselves putting on jackets, scarves, and gloves. In silence, the group went outside.

It was now early evening and the sky was turning dark. Kari led the way and Jim was right by her side. They followed a path where the children had gone. It had snowed all weekend, letting up earlier in the day. The snowdrifts on the side of the path were very high. Reaching above the snow, dead trees were canopies of white. The air was very still. Occasionally, a large pile of snow would fall from some branches, hitting the ground with a low boom. Sometimes, a branch would break too, with a loud crack. The trip took fifteen minutes at a brisk pace. No one spoke a word. As they reached the end of the journey, they began to hear the children’s cries ahead.

They crested a hill; and, in the center of a small, circular depression was the Planski’s Pond of Gold. Jim stopped cold in his tracks. The pond was the size of a backyard pool. It was the shape of a teardrop. There was no snow covering the pond but the snow ran right up to the edge. In the part shaped like a tear well, there was a long rope, piled in a mass. The children were playing on the pond. They took notice of the adults; but ignored them.

Jim ran up to the edge of the pond, knelt down, and examined it closely. A layer of gold mist covered its surface. The gold mist caused the children's feet to appear hidden. Jim put his hand into the gold mist. He laid his palm flat on a solid base. He smacked his hand down several times on the solid base. The mist became darker and denser closer to the base. Jim Hartford whisked away some mist; and, for a fleeting second, he saw the layer of solid gold.

Kari slowly came over. She said, "See Jim, it's a Pond of Gold."

Jim mumbled incoherently, looking up at her.

Kari said, "My son Ted found it last winter. It was just here. The news people came and took pictures and we were in the paper. Then a bunch of government officials came and there was, like, this generator running all night long. It was, like, national news for a while. That's how come I thought you, like, knew, for sure. But everything just died down."

Kari continued, "You can go underneath it too, with the rope. The kids do it all the time. Kids! Jim has never seen our Pond of Gold before! Show him how you go underneath it!"

With much assistance, Jim stood. He was shaking and gasping for breath. Susan kept her fingers covering her mouth the whole time. The children assembled into a line, holding the rope, as if readying for a game of tug-of-war – except, they were all facing the same direction. Two boys were at one end of the rope and the rest of the children gathered at the other end. One of the boys said, "Go!" – and they all started running. The two boys at the front ran past the Pond of Gold, circumnavigating its edge,

continuing up the other side of the depression; and, then, when the children being pulled reached the pond's edge, one by one, they plopped into the gold mist and disappeared from sight. As each child disappeared, Susan said, 'hup!', as if uttering a mini-hiccup; but kept her gloved fingers over her mouth. There was a space of time where all to be seen were the two boys pulling the rope up the side of the snow. Then, the children began flying out the other side of the Pond of Gold, as if projected out by a rocket. They landed in the snow, yelling at the excitement of it all.

Jim looked into Kari's eyes, showing a combination of awesome fear and wonder. His mouth opened slowly. He fought for words but found himself unable to speak. In one brief instant, his countenance altered markedly. His squinted, his eyes darting around suspiciously. His cheeks flushed beet-red and his expression turned from dark to frowning. He stopped shaking and broke free from the arms supporting him. He ran over to the nearest tree and scavenged around on the ground in the snow until producing a big, jagged rock of limestone. Jim raised the rock high over his head, resembling a cave man. A second later, he ran directly for the pond.

As soon as his right foot touched the pond's surface, he slipped and fell backward. Jim's head hit the hard metal. The rock slammed down too. Jim's wife gasped, then screamed. Dazed but undaunted, Jim scrambled upright. He found his rock again, half-emanating from the gold mist. He picked it up and slammed it on the hard surface.

There was a hollow sound, as if a gong had been struck. Jim lifted his rock again and smashed it down on the gold surface. The same eerie sound went out, conjuring infinity.

The stunned groups of adults and children watched. Four more times, Jim slammed his rock on the surface of the Pond of Gold. Then, there came a rumbling sound, emanating within. It started low; but quickly got louder. It sounded like an earthquake.

There was an abrupt, deafening crack, which sounded similar to strong piece of plastic being ripped apart. The mist slowly sucked into a fissure, which appeared in the center of the pond. Below the fissure there was a dark abyss.

Six green heads quickly slithered from the fissure like garden snakes. Upon reaching full extension, they were thirty feet high. The green heads appeared to be connected below the fissure. Each head was at least 3 feet big. The green heads flailed around for ten seconds; and, then, the first head swallowed Jim with one dexterous bite. Simultaneously, another head gulped down Susan. A third ate Tom, as if it were swallowing a pill. A fourth ate Joe with the assistance of a clawed hand, which appeared from the depths, after eating Tom.

The children did not have to be told to run; and, disappeared into the woods, their cries fading away on the cold, thin air.

Another head grabbed Martha and bit her body in half, leaving the remaining bloody carcass to fall in the snow. Kari got about five steps and then the final head scooped her up and ate her too.

The hydra withdrew back into the pit, like an octopus skirting away into the gloom. The surface of the pond turned a sickening light green, solidified, and turned into dark dirt.

