

LINDSEY WIENS

PEWTER

THOUGH IT WAS SOMEWHAT UNORTHODOX, 11-year-old Gorden Jurassovich preferred to keep his collection of silver figurines unpainted. When he wasn't examining them, he kept them wrapped in toilet paper and carefully arranged inside an orange plastic pencil box. On this Saturday morning, he was slowly unravelling each mummified bundle and lining up his treasures on the windowsill: the rearing horse (the first he ever owned), the wren (the smallest), the aircraft (stolen from his cousin), and the unicorn (his favourite). The November sunrise glowed through the frosty windowpanes, crisply accentuating their highlights and shadows. He studied each feather, muscle, and propeller as the characters came alive on his white-washed ledge. Soon, when the sun got brighter and turned the window frost into beads of liquid, he heard his mom call to him from downstairs:

“Gord, your Nan is here. I thought you said you were going to be ready when she got here.”

Despite what other people told him (namely his older brother, Andrew), he felt strongly that the original pewter of the figurines was exquisite and superior to any potential paint job.

As it went every Saturday, Gorden's Nan took him for lunch. They ate at the deli of the grocery store so that Nan could do her shopping in the same trip.

“Mac and cheese for the boy, I'll have the turkey sandwich.” She never noticed that you were supposed to take a number before ordering. Gorden looked away from the fuming customers with their strollers or canes who were urgently trying to get their ham and get out of there.

“Get us a table, Gorden. Not by the window, though.” She smiled sideways to the other shoppers, all strangers. In her mind they could relate to her encumbrance with a half-smile and a slow shrug: “ah, *grandkids*.” Gorden heard one glaring man mutter “bitch” as he carried the tray of food across to the seating area.

Nan came from a family of orchardists. She had inherited a large chunk of land in Kelowna after her parents passed, thus ending any family interest in apples. Nan lived on the property for only a few years—creaking around on the old hardwood while the trees slowly died. Gorden and Andrew spent a couple of summers there developing an interest in chickens, converting two of the picking shacks into what they called aviaries. Nan sold the birds for meat when she moved to her condo in Vancouver. Gorden watched critically as Nan pushed the sandwich far into her mouth and ripped off a large bite. She chewed enthusiastically, always, mayonnaise bobbing around in the corners of her mouth. She was about to speak, mouth still full, but paused when she saw Gorden grin at something behind her.

“Aauh! Oh, Rick. You scared me.”

“Beth, how are you?”

“Oh, you know.” Nan swallowed quickly as she smoothed the hair back from her temples. “I’m getting the hallway by my door re-painted, you know. They have to take the metal part off the door to do that.” She suddenly became serious, and leaned towards Rick. “Did you know they have to do that, take the whole metal thing off? Off before they paint? So that’s what I’m doing this week, they will be taking that right off my door. Then the paint.”

“... Yep,” said Rick, looking across the deli.

Gorden could tell that Nan was frantically trying to think of anything else to announce, hallway related or otherwise, to get Rick to stay. Gorden also wanted him to stay. “Hi Rick,” he said quietly as he drew wide circles in his mac and cheese. Rick turned suddenly, his eyes breaking from his gaze, and smiled warmly at the boy.

“Gorden, my man. You’re looking good. That’s a great haircut.” Gorden felt the familiar hives of embarrassment redden across his pale cheeks, forehead, and chin—the knowledge of their presence further mortifying him.

“Thank you,” he whispered through his eyelashes. Nan started talking again but Gorden didn’t hear the rest of the conversation over the thumping heartbeat deep within his ears.

Rick was tall with wide shoulders, and unlike everyone else Gorden knew, had a calm and warm presence. His dark hair was turning grey, but it was still thick and wavy and styled smartly. He looked weather-beaten but solid, and his numerous plaid shirts smelled of sawdust. Rick was the best part of Saturdays. More realistically, he was the best

part of the whole week. Gorden and Nan usually saw Rick at the grocery store but occasionally they would think of an excuse like a broken chair or a lack of AA batteries and visit his apartment, one floor below Nan's.

After lunch, the Saturday tradition continued. Gorden pushed the cart down each aisle for Nan while she threw in her olives, cold cuts, yogurt, and Cheetos. As they wove up and down the store, Nan proceeded to list all the reasons "Alison" was wrong for Rick (the name of Rick's girlfriend seemed to change each week, but Gorden was sure he had been living in Nan's building with the same nice girl for quite some time). Either way, she was too young. She had a questionable occupation (bartender). Her brother was *a gay*. She dyed her *hair*. She wasn't *fooling* anyone. When the aisles and list of complaints was complete, Nan paid for the groceries by cheque and Gorden hauled the plastic bags to her Pontiac. She always dropped him off at the end of the driveway.

"Your mother hates me, you know. I'll only go in if you invite me."

"See you next week" said Gorden.

That night Gorden sat at his desk with the figurines placed in front of him. On a piece of lined paper, he slowly drew the outline of each shape with a pencil. Once this was complete, he began to carefully shade in the wing details of the wren, but paused when he heard his brother Andrew walking down the hall toward his room.

"How was your date with Nan?" Andrew asked.

"Stupid," said Gorden.

"Why do you even go with her then?" Andrew kicked over a pile of laundry and then rolled onto Gorden's bed. "She's a total downer."

"I know," Gorden replied crisply, and took up his drawing again. Suddenly, Andrew sat up on the bed and said loudly, "Why don't you paint those things?"

"Andrew, get out, you total asshole." A dirty t-shirt hit the side of Gorden's face and slunk to the floor. He was alone again.

Flustered, Gorden sat for a moment in silence, trying to decide how he would spend the rest of the evening. He left the silver characters on his desk and walked out of his room to get the portable to call his friend Mark—but then he could hear his mom already on the phone.

“The woman is a ... what even is that word. Yes. Sociopath. She might actually, technically be one. I’m serious, Meredith!” Gorden crept closer to her room, hovering outside the bathroom door.

“She does this over and over. I’ve fallen for it too many times. I used to feel bad, Mere, but honestly. I hate her. Does that make me a bad person?” There was a pause, then Gorden heard his mom’s signature howling laugh—backwards shrieks of an inhaling hyena. Gorden stepped carefully into the bathroom, but left the light off. He paused to make sure he could still hear from this vantage.

“What a complete *witch!* You know she takes poor Gorden for lunch every Saturday because Andrew refuses to go. They’re not idiots. I think Gorden’s just too ... nice.” Blood rushed to Gorden’s head, and he felt a hive scratch its way out onto his cheek. His mom was quiet, listening. Gorden looked at his round grey face in the darkened mirror and softly touched the hive.

“Oh, that was priceless. When Nan had that removed, she told me at the hospital it was ‘probably due to all the hairspray used in her 30-year career as a stylist.’” Gorden knew the hive would only go away if he stopped touching it, but the bump was magnetic. His arm refused to retract, so he compromised and pressed firmly on the hive with the palm of his hand. He grimaced.

“Meredith, I’m not really sure why no one in the room had the balls to suggest the growth might be due to her fucking *45-year career as a chain-smoker.*”

The following Friday during lunch-hour at school, Gorden repeated the story to his friend Mark: “*Her fucking 45-year career as a chain-smoker!*” Mark howled, and rolled his head back. Hearing Gorden swear was as exciting as hearing about an adult, a *mom*, trash-talking another adult.

“Then what did she say?” Mark shrieked as he wiped away tears. Gorden laughed, but much less enthusiastically.

“I dunno,” shrugged Gorden.

“Tell me what she said, fuck-face!” Hearing himself swear sent Mark into fits of giggles again. All the other kids were already outside and Mark was feeling bold. Gorden jokingly frowned and shoved Mark’s arm, pushing him off balance. Mark teetered on his chair, then took a dive onto the laminate.

“You idiot, Gord.” Mark got up, and both boys laughed in nervous anticipation, wondering what Mark was going to do. He slowly put his hands

on desks to either side of him, got a crazy look in his eye, and shrieked “45-year career chain smoker!” Mark pushed off the desks and swung both legs at Gorden, one of his boots connecting with Gorden’s forearm with a shocking crack. Gorden gasped for several seconds, looking wildly at Mark. Mark looked wildly at Gorden. Silence.

“You broke my fucking arm, you fuck-face 45-year career chain smoker.” Both boys exploded in laughter, then Gorden groaned and swung his head down to his chest.

“I’ll go get Mrs. Firth” said Mark quickly.

It wasn’t surprising to Gorden that Mrs. Firth a) would not look at his arm, b) did not believe it might be broken, and c) refused to call his mother or let him go home. This is because Gorden was often “sick” with a stomach ache or headache or other generic ailment, and thus “needed” to go home from school early on an unacceptably regular basis. Outside the office on one of the institutional waiting chairs, Mark was sweating bullets as he imagined Mrs. Firth’s inevitable wrath. Luckily, Gorden walked coolly out of the office, and smiled slyly at Mark.

“I told her I fell on one of those metal divider things that holds the portables together.” Mark howled and put his arm around Gorden.

When Gorden got home, his mom wasn’t there. Neither was Andrew. His arm was throbbing, the pain constant and dull. He noticed there was one message on the machine so he pressed play. It was Nan. She was calling about lunch the next day, but didn’t hang up the receiver properly once her forcefully loud instructions had been recorded. Her voice was muffled, but he could hear enough of what she said after:

“My grandson Gorden. Yes, with the blonde hair. I know. Slicked down onto his rosy little face. No, his mother won’t let him. ...well I still want a relationship with my daughter. She insists on ... yes, daughter-in-law, and yes, I try. Every Saturday ... well yes, he’s, I don’t know. Gorden is definitely a bit *off*.” She never actually hung up the receiver—the machine just cut off the rest of the message. A wave of sharp agony smacked Gorden’s arm, then washed pain all over his body. “Oooh!” he groaned, and bent forward to cradle the injured arm with the functioning one. Sliding slowly, he shuffled his feet one after the other to his mom’s bathroom. He located the prescription bottle that she always procured when she had one of her headaches, and swallowed two

pills with water from the tap. Like a mortally injured animal, Gorden slunk dejectedly to the couch, lay down carefully but awkwardly, and passed out.

Blankets over his face. Light piercing his heavy eyes. Gorden woke up scratching at his covers, confused. His mouth was hot and slimy, and his body was sweaty under the sheets. Was it dinner time? Why was he in bed? He looked at the clock beside his bed: 8:45. How could it still be light out at 8:45?

“Good morning, lazy butt!” Andrew sang at Gorden as he whizzed by the door. Morning? Suddenly, Gorden’s arm woke up, remembered it had been violently kicked, and shot fires of pain through his whole left side. He croaked out a slow moan and rolled his head into the pillow. He inhaled to call out loudly to his mom, but then paused.

There were things to consider. Things he didn’t want to tell his mom. He panted deeply, willing the agony to subside. It was Saturday. He was going to lunch with Nan. As he calculated the situation, his breathing calmed and the pain dulled. He got out of bed, grabbed the silver unicorn from his desk, and slipped it into the front pocket on his shirt. Lunch didn’t matter to Gorden at all, but what did matter was Rick.

Surprisingly, no one noticed Gorden’s slowly swelling arm. No comments from his mom about carrying him to bed, and nothing from Nan when he opened the door, slid into the front seat of the Pontiac and clicked the seat-belt using exclusively his right hand. The pleather seats were freezing and hard, cracking in places along the piped seams. Gorden could see his white wispy breaths as they drove into town.

“That girl, Amy, is a bit of a tramp, pardon my French,” said Nan as she looked disapprovingly over at Gorden, who sighed.

“Rick would only have a girlfriend who is a nice person,” asserted Gorden, fully believing this as they discussed their mutual favourite topic in detail. When Nan pulled into the parking lot of the grocery store, they both noticed that Rick’s blue pick-up was not there. They both said nothing about it.

Dejected but unwilling to admit why, Gorden and Nan enacted their usual Saturday with little interest. Nan even took a number at the deli before ordering their lunch. Gorden chewed his mac and cheese miserably. His left arm, hidden within his down-filled jacket, throbbed in sharp rhythms. “Get this over with and get home, Gord,” he thought. He knew his mom would be waiting for him as she always was when Nan dropped him off. Maybe he

would even tell her that Nan did it. He smirked, despite the pain, imagining himself at home: “Mom, it was terrible. Nan closed my arm in the car door!” It would never work, but he relished the imagined scenario and his mom’s hypothetical hysterically protective reaction.

“Gorden!” Nan’s voice broke into thoughts. “Can we get the groceries now or what?” Gorden looked down and saw that his mac and cheese was gone. He stood, hit his arm on the chair, and gasped sharply.

“What was that?” shot Nan.

“Nothing,” whispered Gorden. With his one good arm he took the cart Nan had corralled and began pushing it slowly down the first aisle.

Each step was becoming more and more unbearable. Gorden cursed Mark in his mind, although he knew this fiasco was equally his fault. Rick wasn’t even here. He should have just fessed up and not come. Using one hand Gorden awkwardly squeaked the cart around a corner to catch up with Nan. She suddenly gasped “look!” and grabbed his free arm.

“Pineapples are buy one get one free!” Gorden never heard as every microscopic point in his body exploded into convulsing pain. He shrieked “NAN!” and fainted.

Gorden awoke to a buzz of shoppers crowded around him.

“Stand back, everyone” he heard Nan command. The floor was freezing and he was paralysed by the shard of bone in his arm, digging its way upward through his skin. Someone was lifting the back of his head.

“Gorden, my man, are you OK there?” Gorden melted ground-wise in embarrassment. It was Rick. He opened his mouth to speak, but a humiliating snivelling sound came out. He was mortified, in pain, freezing, and helpless.

“How is your head, Gord?” asked Rick softly. “Why did you fall?” Gorden closed his eyes and imagined he was at home at his desk with the rest of his figurines instead of looking like a complete idiot in front of all these people and Rick. Then his throat burst in desperation:

“I broke my arm Mark kicked me and the school didn’t believe it and it’s broken—” inhaling sobs like a machine gun finished the sentence.

“OK partner, I’m going to lift you up.” Gorden’s weight was lifted swiftly and effortlessly as he dangled in utter despair. He kept his eyes closed to hide the hot tears he couldn’t hold back.

“Meet us at the hospital, and call his mother for God’s sake” he heard Rick say. He bobbed along in Rick’s flannel arms, and felt his face turn suddenly cold. They must be in the parking lot. Gorden opened his eyes to see the blue pick-up truck approaching.

“Your truck wasn’t here before” croaked Gorden. Rick said nothing, opened the door, and softly put Gorden into the seat. Every part of Gorden was numb. He hunched forward, utterly frozen, as Rick clicked the seat-belt closed and carefully shut the door. Alone in the truck, Gorden looked up. He immediately spotted Nan across the parking lot, yelling into her archaic cell phone. A tiny crack appeared at the side of his face, the beginning of a smile. Suddenly, he reached for his shirt pocket, confirming that his unicorn was safe. It was. Rick swung the driver’s side door open, hopped in and fired up the engine.

“Don’t worry Gord. Your Nan has to drive herself.” The smile broke and Gorden let out a single snicker.

As they drove, the truck got pleasantly warm and Gorden’s body relaxed into the seat. When they turned off the highway at the hospital exit, it began to snow.

“Finally!” said Rick, “I bet you’ve been waiting to go tobogganing for weeks!” Gorden grinned and nodded. Rick bent forward to crane his neck and look upwards out the windshield.

“Everyone around here hates snow, but just look at that.” A galaxy of white snow fluttered toward them, each flake exquisitely accentuated in front of the grey clouds above. Gorden picked out a single flake and watched it travel from the highest point in the sky all the way down to the matte surface of a shadowy frozen pond. He imagined school might be cancelled on Monday, and smiled.

“You’re a little quiet over there, Gord. You hanging in there? We’re almost at the hospital.” Gorden sat content, but did not say anything. Rick smiled as he looked out at the snowy road and the deep green trees dusted with white. Gorden watched Rick’s relaxed and steady face. He had never felt so warm in his life.

“Well, you’re looking better,” said Rick cheerfully, and Gorden nodded, realizing that Rick was right—there were in fact no hives on his face.

As soon as Gorden’s cast was set, Rick had to leave.

“The roads, my man!” he said as he brushed Gorden’s hair off his forehead. His mom was already there, and Andrew sat quietly in the plastic chair by his bed.

“Thank you so much for driving him here right away,” Gorden’s mom said to Rick, sighing wide-eyed at Gorden. She was oblivious to her damp, floppy snow-hair and the white that covered her shoulders.

“Well, I’m happy I was there to help” replied Rick as he made his exit, “take care folks.” From the hallway, Rick turned to Gorden, gave him a wink, and disappeared. Gorden’s heart raced and he smiled and closed his eyes, remembering the feeling of flannel arms.

“What a wonderful man,” Gorden’s mom reflected.

As the three of them sat waiting for the doctor to return, a shrill voice could be heard at the end of the hall: “I’m a blood relative! I don’t really give a rip if these are visitors’ hours or not!” Gorden’s mom clenched her teeth and marched out the door without saying anything to her boys. Gorden looked at Andrew and they both chuckled.

“Wait, I brought something for you” said Andrew. He unzipped his backpack and pulled out Gorden’s orange plastic figurine box.

“They were on your desk but I wrapped them up to bring.” Gorden and Andrew carefully unravelled each figurine and placed them on the plastic table tray. Gorden pulled the unicorn from his shirt pocket and placed it with the rest. “That one actually looks good silver,” said Andrew.

From the hospital bed, Gorden could see the quiet snow falling. He was glad, imagining Rick’s excitement at the deepening snow and picturesque winter landscape. Gorden closed his eyes and willed it to keep snowing, to keep getting more beautiful.