

“Tumbleweeds”

When I was six, I asked my mother why we moved so often. Rarely did we last in a house longer than a year. My mother said that we were like tumbleweeds. “We go where the wind takes us, Nani.”

A tumbleweed is no great beauty. It is gnarled, yellow branches coiled together in a ball, racing down a dusty dirt road with no end in sight.

I never wanted to be a tumbleweed. Not only because I found them ugly— unrooted from the earth, always moving and never settling— but because I didn’t trust the wind to take me where I needed to be. What did the wind know that I did not?

When I was eight, I told my mother that I was not a tumbleweed at all.

Mom smiled at me, like she knew something I didn’t. It wasn’t a look I favored, but one she offered me all too often. “What are you then?” She sat on an overturned bucket, a bowl in her lap as she shucked peas of their green husk. I had hoped that the pea garden meant we might stay here longer. I would later learn that it was not a lack of wanting to stay, but a lack of money allowing us to.

“A horse,” I decided, walking along a line of oblong stones I’d made, with my arms out as if I were balancing on a tightrope.

“What kind of horse?”

“A brown one.”

She laughed. “Brown? Like that mud pie you tricked your sister into eating?”

“Brown like us.” I hopped off my stone-tightrope and walked to her, taking a seat on the yellow grass. My mother’s fingers were long and tapered, perfect for pianos and peas alike. “Grandma says we’re red-skinned, but I think she needs glasses.”

Mom scraped her dark hair back from her sweat-dampened brow and shook her head. “She has eyes like an eagle.”

“Maybe eagles are colour-blind.”

“Grandma doesn’t think we’re really red. But a long time ago, that was what they called us.”

“Why?” I dug a hand in the bowl and stole a few peas, popping them into my mouth and smiling at her exasperated frown.

“Because people like to label things.”

“Grandma labels everything. She has a cactus in her backyard that she calls Juniper. She talks to it sometimes.”

“She named it after someone she lost,” Mom explained. “When Grandma was your age, she had a friend named Juniper.”

“What happened to her?”

“They were swimming down at the river, and Juniper was pulled down by the undertow. She never came back up... We honor people we love and miss. Juniper was lost to the water, so Grandma carved out a new place for her spirit to come to. Somewhere dry.”

I hummed and reached for more peas.

Mom caught me this time. “These are for dinner!”

I grinned. “You always say to eat more veggies.”

With a frown that was probably hiding a smile, she stood from her bucket and carried the bowl inside the house. Two wooden steps led to the screen door. We didn’t have air conditioning, so all the windows were left open, but the breeze hardly made the curtains move. Mom had made them from the fabric Grandma had gifted her on her birthday. Thin and white with lace edging around the bottom—they were the prettiest thing in the house. Everything else we owned was old and worn. Especially my clothes. There were holes in the knees of all my jeans, and the cuffs were ripped and peeling from dragging on the ground. But I always wore shorts in the summer. The wind was dry and brittle, doing little to cool the sweat that collected in every awkward place a body had.

“Do you have a Juniper?” I climbed onto a chair next to the kitchen counter while Mom rinsed the peas in the sink.

“We all have Junipers.”

I didn’t have a Juniper. Not yet. I had a Barbra, but she didn’t like swimming so much. She liked climbing trees, though. With that thought in mind, I raced back out the door, calling out to Mom that I’d be home for dinner.

I forgot for a while that I didn’t want to be a tumbleweed; rather, a powerful brown horse that chose where it ran and for how long and when it would stop. I forgot until we had to move again. The new place didn’t have a pea garden, but it did have a small, squat tree with branches that spread out like a curtain. If I climbed through them to sit at the trunk, it was like I was in a cave, where sound grew quiet and there was nothing but the bark at my back and the grass under my legs. It wasn’t much, but it was mine.

When I was ten, I told Mom I didn’t want to be a horse anymore. I wanted to be a tree.

Mom was descaling a salmon in the sink; there was a whole bucket of them nearby. Two of my cousins had dropped them off that morning. Descaling fish was a messy job, but it’d be worth it in the end. Grandma would smoke half and can the rest.

“What if you wanna go somewhere else?” she wondered.

“I don’t want to. I like it here.”

The new house was even closer to Barbra. It didn’t have a pea garden, but sometimes, I snuck back to the old house and stole peas anyway. Nobody was living there yet, so really, they were going to waste otherwise.

“What about in the winter? It’ll be cold and you can’t come inside to warm up.”

“You can bring me hot chocolate. And a blanket. And grandma can knit me a scarf and gloves!”

She smiled at me over her shoulder. “That sounds like a lot of work. Why can’t you knit your own things, hey?”

I wiggled my fingers at her. “I’ll have twigs for fingers. You can’t knit with twigs!”

“Says who?”

I giggled and stared up at her. “What would you be?”

“When?”

“*Now.*” I jumped and pulled myself up to sit on the counter. “If you couldn’t be a tumbleweed, what would you be?”

She took a deep breath and stared down into the sink. “I would be... a *bear.*”

“Why?”

“Because bears are fierce and protective... and they always watch out for their young.” She flicked her hand at me then, and fish scales clung to my cheek.

“*Ew!*” I wiped at them with a hand, but I was smiling so wide that my face hurt a little.

“Not ew.” She shook her head, and then lifted the half-scaly fish out from the sink and thrust it toward me. “We honor the fish that feeds us.” She wiggled it at me. “Kiss the honored fish, Nani.”

Laughing, I leaned away. “No!”

“Fine.” She turned the fish and popped a kiss to its squishy lips. “There. See!”

Rolling my eyes, I hopped off the counter and started for the back door, where I paused. “You’d make a good bear.”

Mom looked back at me, flushed and smiling. “Because I’m a fierce warrior?”

“The fiercest.” With that, I left, racing down the street to see if Barbra wanted to come over for dinner. There was plenty of fish to go around.

When I was thirteen, I asked my grandma if she was a tumbleweed. For as long as I could remember, Grandma had lived in the same house. Her parents had built it years ago; she and her eight brothers and sisters were raised in its two bedrooms. Then Grandma had gone on to raise her own five children in it, too. Most of my aunts and uncles scattered to the wind, tumbling far and wide, leaving only Grandma, Aunty B, and Mom behind. But they called and wrote, and every few years, they'd gather together for a reunion that lasted a full week. I'd never seen so many brown faces as when my family came together, nor heard so many voices clamouring to tell their stories. It was always my favorite week, even if came so infrequently.

"I'm a beaver," she said, very sure of herself, as if the question had been asked often.

"Why a beaver?"

"They build things."

Grandma bustled around the kitchen, always busy and never still. It was the dead of winter and a foot of snow covered everything outside, including Juniper. I always wondered how Juniper survived there. Most of the year, everything was dry. Juniper probably lived in her glory then. But, when the snow came, the ground grew wet and soggy. Maybe the spirit of her namesake kept her going.

"I was never good with a hammer or nails," Grandma said, "but I built other things."

Grandma loved arts and crafts. Whenever my sister and I visited, she always had something for us to make. She and Aunty B both loved to create things from nothing, and, though I tried, I could never quite reach their skill.

"Can you teach me how to make baskets?" I wondered.

Grandma had learned how to weave baskets from her mother when she was even younger than me. She made one every year and then gave it to a family member with a homemade quilt. Mom said that was why her hands were so rough, it was from all the work she put into making things. 'Rough hands are beautiful because they tell a story.'

My hands were soft. I had a scar on my left pinkie finger from a fish hook, but other than that, they didn't have a callus anywhere in sight.

"Why?" Grandma asked, smiling at me. "You want to be a beaver, too?"

"Maybe. At least sometimes."

"Come on then. I'll show you how."

I hopped off the worn arm-chair, patched up in random places from where the fabric split. She led me to the spare room, bereft of a bed and filled with a large, square table. Shelves lined the walls, covered in spools of thread, jars of beads and decals, and folded up scraps of fabric.

I dragged a chair over to the table and watched Grandma move around the room, humming under her breath. I'd spent countless days there, making homemade earrings and necklaces or watching her sew. Last year, she made jingle dresses for me and my cousin to wear at the pow-wow. I

could still hear them ringing in my ears as my feet pounded the dusty ground and my knees reached as high as my heart while I jumped and danced, arms stretched toward the sky.

“Here. You’ll need this.” Grandma took a seat across from me, her weathered hands moving to and fro. I watched every move and mirrored it all.

When I was eighteen, I left home for college.

My mother helped me pack my beat-up car, busying herself with making sure I had everything I needed. “You have to call as soon as you get there, and every Wednesday after.” She blinked to hide the tears in her eyes.

I hugged her, burying my face at her neck. She smelled like sweet grass and the perfume she only wore on special occasions. “I’ll be okay,” I promised.

She squeezed tighter. “How do you know?”

“Because. I had a bear for a mom.”

She laughed thickly. “And I had a horse for a daughter.”

On the way out of town, I wondered if I really was a horse. Maybe one day, when my feet grew restless for travel, I’d be a tumbleweed of my own making. When I had children of my own, I’d be the mother bear. And when I grew old and my hands were weathered, I’d be the beaver, leaving a trail of creation in my wake. In that moment, I only knew that I was of the earth, and it was of me.