

## ALLERGIC TO RAINBOWS

Three days after my sixteenth birthday, I told my grandmother I wanted to go to university. I told her I wanted to become a chemist. I told her I wanted to be a somebody in the world.

“You’re crazy,” she proclaimed, and turned up the TV.

“So what?” I shot back.

“Rosie, do you honestly think you’re going to fit in at university?” my grandmother demanded. “You’re a skinny little girl from a reservation nobody’s ever heard of.”

I wanted to cry, and scream, and punch something. I never ended up doing those things. Instead, I walked away to study. But my grandma wasn’t finished.

“How do you think you’re going to survive being out there when you’re practically allergic to rainbow-striped book bags?”

She had a point. If they made Epi-pens for rainbow-striped book bags, I’d need one to help me breathe, and stay alive as my throat closed up.

I studied for the whole evening. I was reading about light and prisms at one in the morning, when I saw it. There was a picture of a rainbow, and an explanation of how light and the rainbow were forever interconnected.

Rainbows reminded me of ropes.

When I was eleven, my grandmother had insisted we “get away from everything” for a while. That was code for “get out of this hellhole temporarily.” We were walking down a crowded city street when I saw the rainbow-striped book bag lying amongst cigarette butts. It was a little dirtier than I remembered. It was damaged, and smelled like fresh pee. But it was there. The memory of my mother’s pale face and long dark hair flooded back into my head. My feet stopped. Everything around me came to a screeching halt as the memory crashed into my brain.

“What’s the matter?” my grandma asked beside me. I simply pointed to it.

“That is not hers, okay? It is someone else’s,” she declared firmly. I shook my head.

“It belongs to someone else, Rosie. Do you hear me? It’s not your mother’s,” she repeated again.

I sank to the sidewalk, and covered my face with my hands. Car brakes squealed on the road beside me. I couldn’t look at it; I couldn’t walk past it. I had spent five years trying to push the nightmares away and in the blink of an eye, it was back. My throat was closing up; my breath left. The letter with her tortured writing seared the inside of my eyelids. I remembered the hair, the rope, the vodka. It was all there. My grandmother kneeled down, and wrapped her solid arms around me. She buried her face in my waxy, unwashed hair. She whispered something soothing over and over again.

And when I was ready, she peeled me off the street, and held my hand as we walked. I focused on her hand, keeping me connected to her. It kept me stable. It kept me sane. I studied until I fell asleep on my books at two in the morning.

“What are you doing?” my grandma asked me when I refused to watch *Wheel of Fortune* with her. Crappy music was blaring from next door. “Do you not like who you are?

You’re not happy with your own culture and the traditions of your ancestors?”

I shrugged my shoulders.

“Why?” she demanded.

“Because,” I started to say, and then I just walked into my room. I shut the door behind me, even though it didn’t matter. I could still hear everything.

When I was six years old, I wandered into the kitchen because I was hungry. There was no food in the cupboards, but I wanted to check anyway. Just in case. A note written in my mother’s loopy handwriting was pasted to the fridge.

*“I’m sorry. I love you.”*

Something was wrong. Something had changed, and it would never be the same again.

“Mom!” I called out.

I found her a few minutes later. Her face was pale. Her black hair dangled down from her head. A rope was around her neck. Her lifeless body was suspended in front of me, in midair. The world fell apart, and all I could hear were my own screams of horror. All I could see was the fabric of the rainbow-striped book bag that I buried my face in.

All I could smell was vodka and a dead body. I think the rainbows helped me that day.

They kept me from falling into nothingness. They gave me something to look at because I couldn’t look at my mother.

I didn't know it as I screamed and tried to tape my world back together, but my mother was the fifty-sixth person to kill herself on the small Manitoba reservation I called home that year. She was the fifty-sixth person to perpetually smell of tears, and the fifty-sixth person to quit smiling. My grandmother said she was the fifty-sixth person to give up hope.

"What's this?" my grandma asked one day when she was helping me clean my room. The rainbow bag was in her hands.

"I looked at it, instead of looking at her," I explained quietly.

She nodded, and sauntered out of the room to smoke. I never saw the bag again.

"Rosie!" my grandma shouted, as we watched TV together. It was a Friday night, and I was exhausted.

"What?" I asked.

"Why do you always study? You never hang out with friends and do things that normal kids do," she proclaimed.

I just shrugged. "You're not supposed to tell me I'm weird."

She frowned. "Why not? You *are* weird."

"It's bad for my self-esteem," I explained.

"Okay, Rosie. I think you're an amazing young woman and I wish you every happiness."

"That's sort of sarcastic, grandma," I said.

She nodded. "Yes. I'm trying to prepare you for the way the world works."

"Really?" I asked.

“Yeah.”

She gave me another firm nod.

I loved my grandmother, but I could tell that she was lying through her teeth.

I got accepted to the University of Manitoba on a Friday. It was the best day of my life, and it was also the day I realized that nothing would ever be the same again. My neighbours asked me why I would ever want to leave the reservation, when my family and entire life was there. They thought I had lost my mind, and called me stupid behind my back. I just shrugged.

“Why do you want to do this?” my grandma asked, as tendrils of smoke from her cigarette floated around her head like a halo. “Why do you want to leave me?”

I simply shrugged.

*Because, I thought. Because I want to have a real job. Because I want to be able to afford shampoo, and soap, and good-quality toothpaste. Because I want to have a fridge with real food in it someday. Because I want to be a somebody.*

I had a thousand reasons why I was going to university.

I didn't say any of them.

“You don't have a backpack,” my grandmother said, as I was getting ready to leave the week before classes started. I fought the urge to roll my eyes and run away.

“Yeah, I'm going to put all my books in this grocery bag,” I reminded her.

“I didn't want you to go because your mother met your father off the reservation,” my grandmother whispered. “She left when she was about your age and came back with him when things were starting to go down the tubes.”

There were tears in my grandma's eyes and it suddenly occurred to me that I'd never seen her cry before.

"I tried to help her get rid of the drinking, the drugs, and her violent husband. I really did. But I guess I was just too late," my grandma said.

She cleared her throat. "I got this for you," she declared, and held out a book bag. It had rainbow stripes on it, and it looked brand-new. For a moment, the memory of stares on a city street nearly broke my shoulders. For a moment, I wondered how my grandma could afford a new backpack for me, when she couldn't even afford a lousy box of Kraft dinner. "Thanks," I stuttered, and she nodded.

I looked into her dark, familiar eyes for a moment, and wondered what she could possibly be thinking. I was the first person she'd ever known to consider going to university. I was the first person she'd ever known to have a career plan. But I wasn't the first person to abandon her. Her lips parted slightly, and I braced myself.

"You're doing the right thing," she said with a small nod, which made me smile for the first time in an eternity.