

INNER CHILD

Mal Siobhan

There was only half an hour left until the date. I'd been stalling all afternoon, and now I was running out of time until Jess showed up, ready to go. I wasn't even dressed yet.

It wasn't that I wasn't excited for the date - I'd even picked the restaurant we were going to, and it was one of my favourites. But it was also a nice restaurant, and a nice restaurant meant a nice outfit. So, in other words, I had to go and put on a suit.

I had two options for this - the suit I had worn to my aunt's funeral, and the one my mother had bought me for my senior year's high school ball. One of them a charcoal grey, the other more of a blue-tinged grey. Both of them hanging limp on the back of my door, coathangers overlapping and tangling the sleeves.

They fit well enough, even after a year or two, but that didn't make me hate them any less. In fact, the way they hugged to my shoulders and dropped past my hips only made it all the worse.

Behind me, on the bed, I heard the sound of a raspberry being blown. A young voice, high with his lack of age, exclaimed, "These are so boring." I traced patterns in the carpet, sitting on the floor with my back to the frame. For the moment, I didn't take my eyes off the suits, still hanging there and waiting for my verdict.

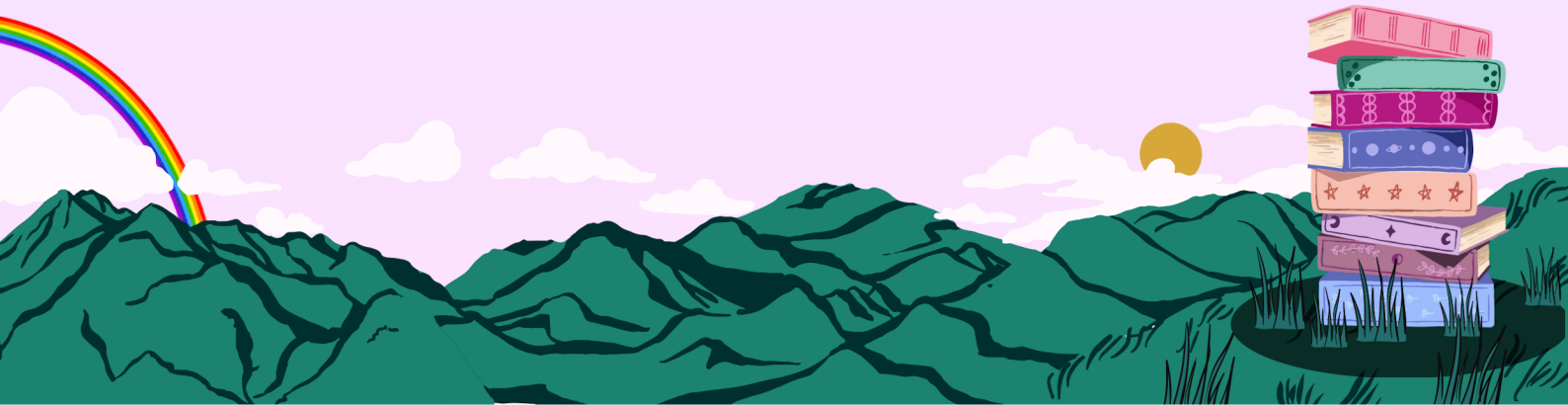
"They're... smart."

Another fart sound, blown through young lips. "They're dumb," the child's voice declared. "And they're so grey. Wear something pink."

"I can't wear pink," I said slowly.

"Yes, you can. I'm wearing pink."

I turned to look behind me, up on the bed, and I saw the same visitor I always had.



Young boy, barely four at the most, sparkling with a pink glitter tutu and smears of amateur makeup, high heels hanging off of tiny ankles by the straps. His hair was mussed and long, in need of a haircut, a blue t-shirt with red trucks depicted underneath layers of long plastic necklaces.

Nothing matched up. A jigsaw puzzle with the pieces wrestled into the wrong places -

D was always like that.

“You have pink,” he continued, always needling. “It looks nice. No one looks good in grey.”

I swallowed hard. I stopped seeing the suits.

“I don’t wear pink anymore,” I said slowly. My mind struggled for a simple explanation to give to a child. “Not with Jess. She’d like me to wear a suit.”

“I don’t want you to wear a suit,” D argued. He sat forward on the bed so that his legs hung off the edge, not even the dangling heels of his borrowed shoes reaching the floor. “Jess wants you to look nice. You should get out the bag from the back.”

I blew out a deep, slow breath. I gave up the battle of trying not to think about the bag of things, tucked into the furthest corner of my closet with an unassuming supermarket brand label slapped onto the sides. It was getting full now, and thus harder to ignore, bursting with things I’d pulled off of op shop racks with what little spare change I had as a university student.

I didn’t wear any of the clothes in there, at least not outside of my room. There were a few small pieces, singlets with daisies or lacy bralettes, that I had dared to wear out underneath layers of baggy tops and hoodies, but I certainly hadn’t worn any of it as an outfit. I liked the way they felt, the way they looked on me when I was alone. But I wasn’t sure that the backdrop of the real world would suit them so well.

I wasn’t sure Jess would want to go to dinner with me like that.

I ended up with the bag out on the bed, the contents spilling over the covers as D sat up on his knees and dug through it. There was more there now than I’d thought. I spent so much time trying to keep it pushed out of



sight, I hadn't realised how much there was. Bright colours and pastel colours, casual and dressy and formal. All the things I imagined some better, fictional version of me wearing.

"This one is pretty," D said, his mouth making a little o as he held up the dress. I almost hadn't bought it - it wasn't particularly shaped, and I had worried it would simply hang off me like I was a long and skinny pole, no clue as to where my hips and chest were hidden underneath. The price tag had been what convinced me, and seeing the colours and floral patterns on myself - lack of hips and chest aside - had proved worth it.

If there were any outfit I would risk wearing to such a nice place with Jess, it would be this one.

D shuffled to the end of the bed, still on his knees, and reached up with the dress, as if to see what it would look like on me. "Purple is nice. Even prettier than pink. We look good in purple, don't we?"

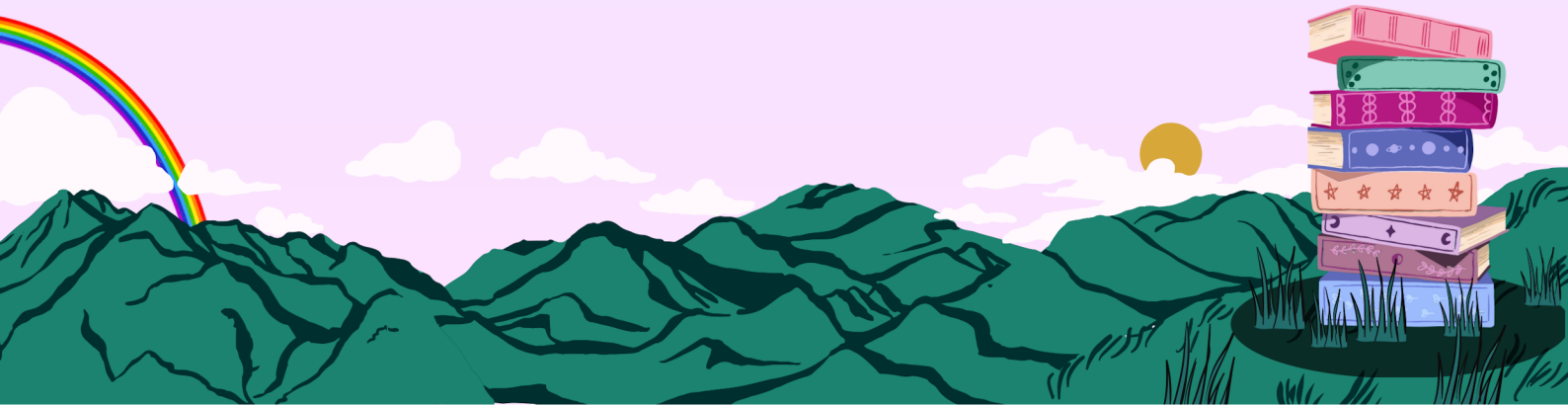
For a moment, my eyes remained on the dress, taking in the rich colour and the intricate patterns and remembering myself in the mirror. I imagined walking into the restaurant with this on, Jess at my side.

"Well," I said, my mouth somewhat on autopilot, "I guess we'd better find out."

D's squeal of joy took me right back to four years old.

Whatever remained of my half hour to prepare flew by. I wiggled into the dress and dug through the bottom of the bag for anything else I had to class it up, take me from simply feminine to pretty. D giggled all the while, leaning off the edge of the bed to reach where I was kneeling, smearing cheap glittery stuff onto my eyelids and tinted lip balm over my lips. It wasn't a masterpiece by any stretch - messy and uneven and unskilled - but we would get better at it. Maybe now, we'd start practising for real.

Just as I laced up my usual converse, realising I didn't have any nicer shoes to wear, a knock on the door sounded through the apartment. I looked up to meet eyes with D.



I remembered that innocent smile, even as it looked different on my face now and would look different again in the future. D's head tilted to one side, honey brown hair falling into her eyes, and I could finally see that little piece of myself in her.

"You look so pretty," she said. "Good luck."

I smiled, watching her disappear, fading out as she always did. That was okay. She was everywhere with me, anyway, a Russian nesting doll buried in the deepest parts of myself. Maybe now she could see the light a little more often.

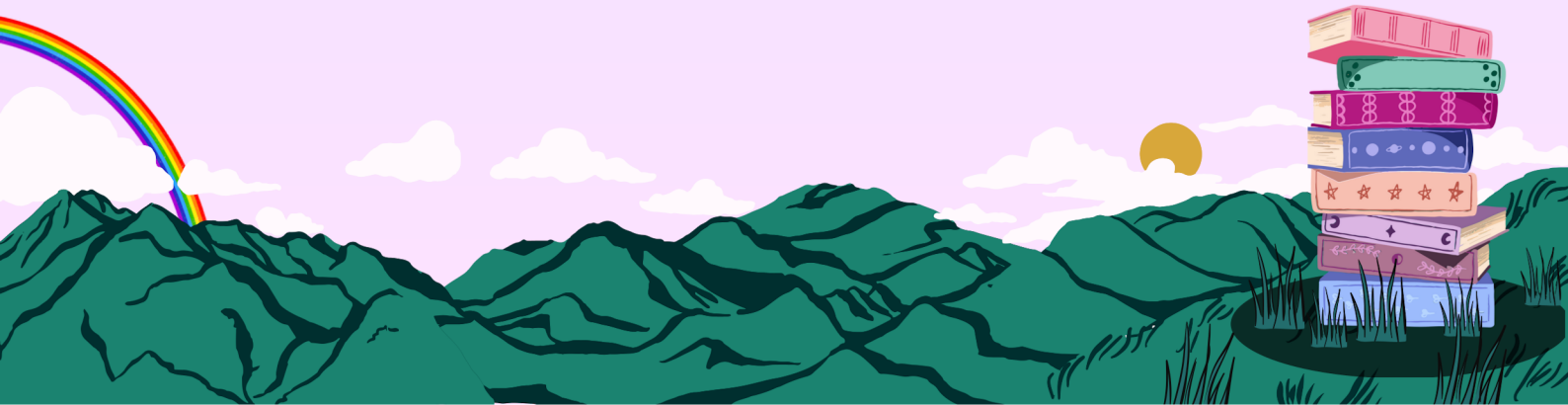
Taking a deep breath, preparing for whatever was to come, I forced myself to stand and walk to the door, pulling it open before I could second guess myself.

For what it was worth, Jess definitely looked surprised to see me. But even in that initial look of shock, there was that telltale twitch of the dimples in her cheeks, making it not just shock but delight.

"Oh, D—" She cut herself off, pausing for a moment, considering. "Wow. You look gorgeous."

She sounded so genuine, and it made my throat hurt a little.

"So do you," I said, probably wearing my own look of shock. Because Jess wasn't wearing a dress, or even a skirt. She was wearing a suit, black and dark purple, fashioned to fit her perfectly in a way I knew she was never able to find when thrifting. Things were either her size and hung off her like tent fabric, or tailored beautifully three sizes too small. But this was perfect.



I realised that my eyes were fogging up, and that the weight on my shoulders was pouring out in the form of tears. It wasn't a bad thing - tears of relief, if such a thing existed -but Jess stepped forward anyways, putting her arms around me and holding me close.

"You're beautiful," she whispered. "You look so happy, darling. I love you."

I kept my face tucked into her shoulder. "I love you, too."

She turned slightly to kiss my cheek. "Do you still want to go out tonight?"

I thought of the boy - the girl that I was, in ill-fitting necklaces and tutus, and how much she'd love to walk the streets of the world as herself. I thought of the shine in her eyes, dressing me up, getting to see me finally becoming someone she'd always wanted to be. I smiled a little.

"Yeah. Let's go."

