

SPORE THOUGHTS

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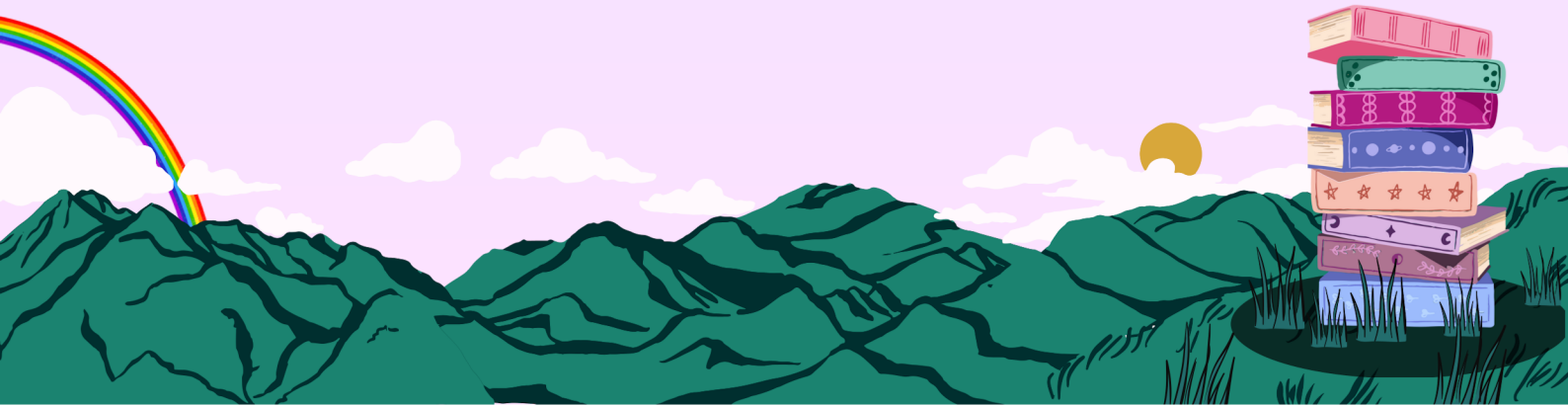
Geraldine's flat was mouldy. She wasn't sure if it was the shaded location — or the torrential rain that plagued her suburb — but the air was heavy with water, and when she pressed her hand against the wall the plaster would sink in slightly, her hand coming away wet. She'd tried opening the windows. But that just let in more damp.

It started with a mushroom in the bathroom. In the bottom corner, sandwiched between the shower and the door. It had sprouted overnight. The fuzzy black cap looked up at her, still and staring. She felt dirty just looking at it. Geraldine plucked it out with a paper towel, put it in the bin, and thought no more about it.

It was different now. They were always on her mind. And on her clothes, drying on the clothes horse, and on the bench, and in the cups and on the towels and in the grout and on the ceiling, reaching down towards her. It wasn't just the mushrooms. There was mould too, inching and spreading over every surface, crawling over every wall. Each day there would be more. Geraldine had measured it at first, tracking its progress. She didn't anymore.

At first, she'd cleaned every day. She went through packet after packet of cloths and bleach and she'd scrubbed and scrubbed and scrubbed until her fingers ached. She'd tried calling the landlords, but they didn't answer. It always went to voicemail.

Then she'd gone away for a weekend. To see her... parents? She doesn't remember. But when she came back, the house had greeted her with a fuzzy haze of spores, rising from the chimney like smoke.



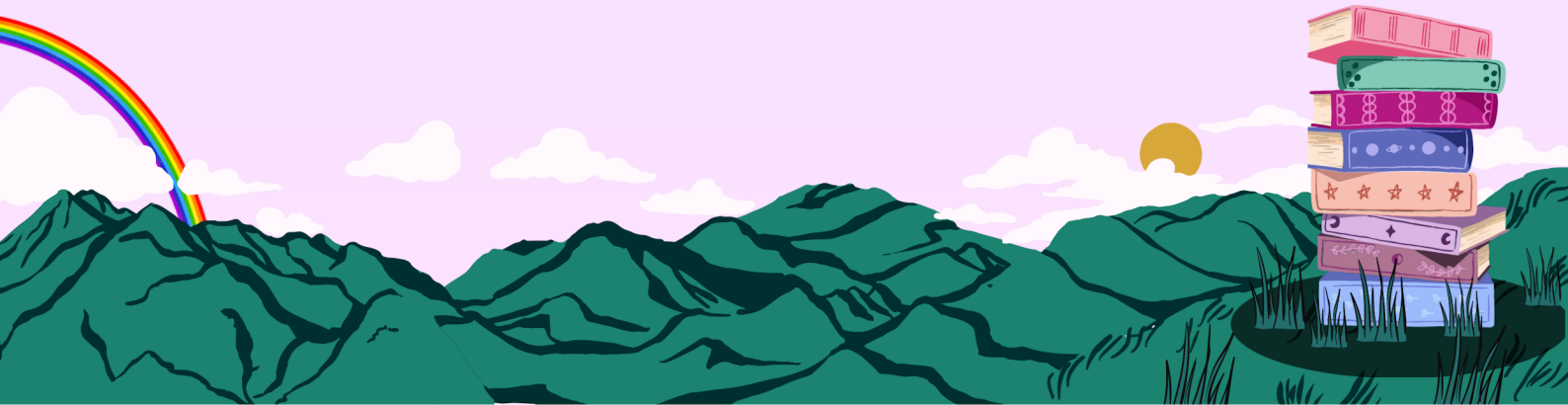
As far as bedrooms go, Geraldine had thought hers wasn't half bad. Beggars can't be choosers, she knew, though she'd have liked a little more sunlight. But as she grew accustomed, so did the rot, and eventually her windows were so coated that any sun squeezing through the cracks was stained a putrid blue.

The tap in the bathroom was choked shut, and Geraldine had to open a new toothbrush every morning. They'd go mouldy overnight, teal blotches coating the handle and bristles. She got the environmentally friendly ones, but she still felt bad. She'd thought about just chewing gum, but her dentist had said if she didn't brush her teeth, they would rot, and the thought of fleshy caps rising from her gums and filling her mouth, breath wheezing between the stalks of spongy, expanding mushrooms until there were so many all she could do was choke—

Well. It made her feel sick. And Geraldine didn't like to be sick. So she brushed.

The kitchen was the worst. It got a lot of sunlight, so Geraldine could see the spores drifting through the air, crowding the dustmotes out of the beams. She'd stopped bringing home fresh food months ago, stocking up on several weeks worth of cans instead, but there was still the remains of an apple sitting in the fruit bowl. She was too scared to touch it, so it just sat there, festering.

Geraldine was learning about mushrooms in her biology course. The study tabs open on her screen talked of spores and stalks and gills and caps and heads. They talked about how the mushroom part was only the fruiting body, and beneath that was the long, searching tendrils of the mycelium. Composed of tiny threads, mycorrhizal fungi burrowed their mycelia inside the cells of trees and fed them, nourished them. Or, in some cases, parasitised them. Sucking their life away. Mycelium can be generated



from a single spore... Geraldine shut her laptop.

She wondered if they could get into human cells, too. Was the fungus nourishing her?

Or was it slowly eating her away until only their tendrils kept her standing. Were they tugging at her nerves? Jerking her through her routine to keep her unknowing? Complacent? Was that why she felt so distant all the time — just going through the motions? Or maybe that was the loneliness.

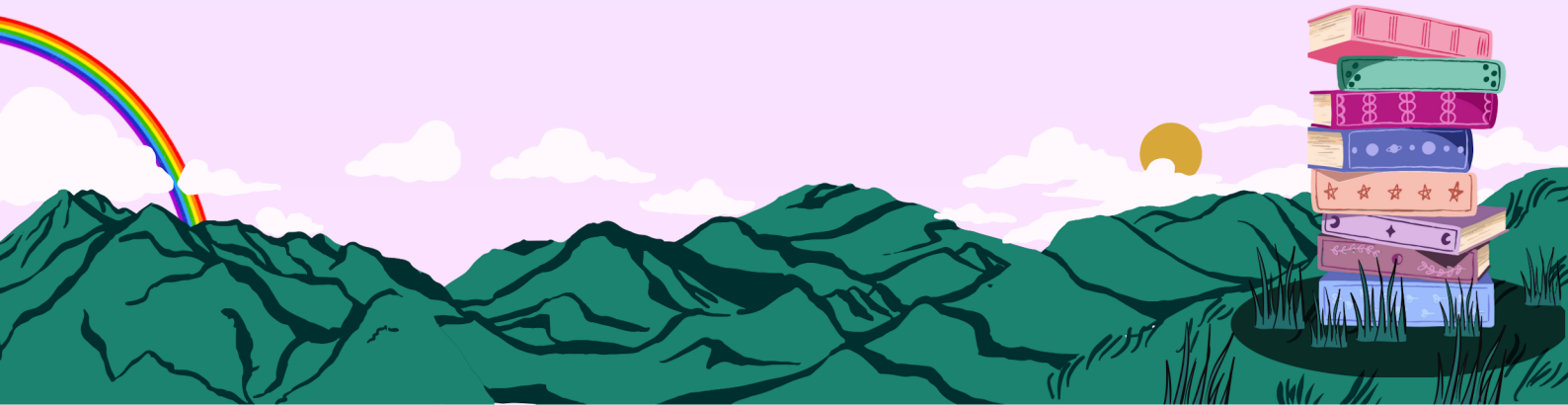
Geraldine couldn't tell if it was her own thoughts she was thinking. Were they hers? Or were they placed there by the fungi, spores germinating a single thought that branched into many more. She didn't know for certain. She didn't know which she wanted it to be, either. Better that she have free will? And authority over her own body? Or better to be able to blame the fungus for all her mistakes.

Everyone had moved out of the flat. Not all at once, of course. But slowly, gradually, leases ran out, and people moved on to better and brighter futures. Not Geraldine. She couldn't afford it. Rent was too high in other places, and besides. It wasn't so bad here. Or maybe that was the mushrooms talking.

Rooms are hard to fill in this part of town. People are desperate — but not that desperate. So the rooms emptied, and stayed empty. And Geraldine was alone.

The mould filled her lungs with spores and her brain with paranoia, so Geraldine picked at her face. Every morning, after her shower, she would poke and prod and stretch her skin, scratching and scraping — searching for any sign that the mould was growing on her too.

She would dig her fingers into any marks, excavating until it was a bleeding welt and her face was pockmarked with raised red lumps. And then she would hate herself for giving the fungus something to feed on.



Eventually, she covered up the mirror. Better to not know, she thought. Better to not see. She wanted to scream, but she didn't like to open her mouth, so she settled for a choked sob instead.

Every night, Geraldine turned out the light and lay down on the floor. Her bed would loom next to her, a garden of orange and brown and red that she couldn't see in the dull moonlight. Then Geraldine would squeeze her eyes tight shut, and try not to think about mould creeping over her eyelids, sealing them shut so she'd never see the daylight again.

This particular night was very still. The rain didn't batter the roof like it usually did, and the wind was nothing but a whisper. Moonlight trickled in. The curtains were stiff with fungus, and the window was so coated anyway that Geraldine never bothered to close them. The world was silent but for the creaking of the house and the soft in and out of Geraldine's breathing. Then with a soft puff a cloud of spores was released into the room. They swirled gently around the sleeping Geraldine, caressing her face and filling her aching lungs more and more until there was no air left in them. And when she woke the next morning, mycelium cradling her bones, Geraldine was not the same girl who had gone to sleep.

When she opened her eyes Geraldine felt better than she had in months. She sat up, stretched, and absentmindedly scratched at her arm. Her nails caught on something soft. She looked down, and in the pale morning light Geraldine could see the fleshy caps of mushrooms growing from her exposed skin.

A part of her felt that perhaps this should be concerning, but the thoughts of others crowded against her own. They stifled and smothered her worry, new thoughts blossoming in their place — thoughts of gentle wind and wet earth and the early morning air.



So, for the first time in weeks, Geraldine opened her front door.

The morning sunlight was weak, and the air was damp with dew drops. Geraldine smiled, and began to walk down her street. The more she walked, the better she felt, and the more the fungi in and around her bloomed and blossomed. She felt so good, in fact, that she didn't notice the spores coming out of her mouth with every exhale. They misted in front of her like breath on a frosty morning. They spiralled and curved, showing the shape of the air and its currents.

The wind bumped and breezed them through the window of the neighbours house, where they alighted on an uncovered plate of rice. The spores burrowed down and fungi began to reach and grow, mould spreading out from the plate and onto the counter.

The family were away for the weekend. They wouldn't notice until it was too late.

Down the street, Geraldine walked none-the-wiser, the fungi murmuring to her. They whispered of damp places and safety and community. And they told her not to worry about her newly colonised skin.

Beautiful, they said. Beautiful.

Beautiful, Geraldine thought, and she smiled.

