

THE RUN THAT NEVER ENDS

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The destination shimmers and shakes, but the run is constant.

Side effects include large doses of blue sky and sundust, the density unravelling so quickly you can't even finish whispering I Miss You.

Emotion pools at the base of my throat, and I'm hit with a chokehold of nostalgia during the after-school loops. I reminisce the winter mornings when the air sits so still teeth can taste the direction algae, moss, and mould yearn to grow - despite the fragility of it all.

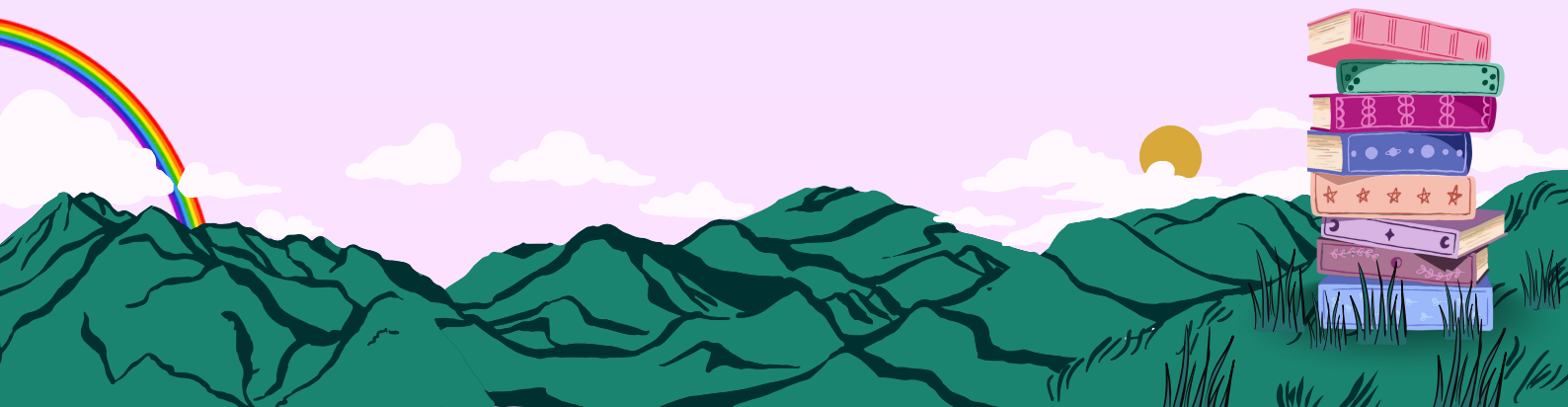
There's the sprint from Baba's car to the front door - foggy condensation and wet hair - a not-too-distant past with warm cheeks from swimming class. My temples have grooves from too-tight goggles, and the smell of chlorine mixes with the anticipation of Mama's bbq pork belly. I slip my Crocs off at the door and -

In this world, some runs finish quickly—the sprint to the bus stop. The training laps around the Lake - dodging goose poop and the coach's gaze. There's a cold glass of water and oranges at the end. Or Powerade and a bag of Burger Rings if you're extra lucky. These are the runs we romanticise. The ones worth getting shin splints for.

But there are also runs that trick us, a glistening finish line, only for the lap to restart.

The longest runs are the ones that transpire hometown, a mental railroad track that chugs forward without regard for others.

It's the run I'm still on.



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My favourite run stretches along the East Coast Bays. On one side are the North Shore mansions, perfectly manicured gardens, the kind of shit you'd see at furniture stores I can't even name-drop cuz we found most of our outdoor furniture in the yearly white-wear collection dump in the driveways.

“Nothing is actually broken. You just need to -”

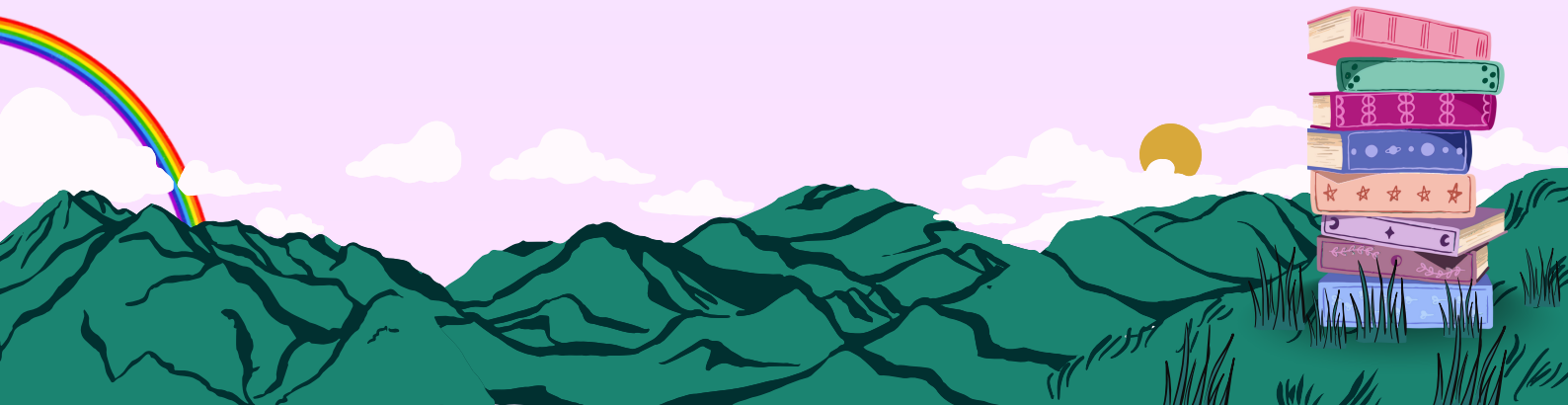
On the other side were the soaring cliffs, forever moody frothy waves and seagulls in suspension. The jasmine and lavender bushes wafting as the setting sun made silhouettes of trees, flax and Rangitoto island.

You don't get good at running because you're always trying to run away from home. You get really good at sprinting because there's something you're racing towards. My first girlfriend lived on the other side of Browns Bay—a 5km loop.

I loved running to her house.

We're 15 years old and in maths class together. She asked if I thought the weather presenter on the 6 o'clock news was a cutie. I answered - Yeah, she's kinda hot.

She wrote down a list of songs to listen to. Then, like some moody Tumblr post, we sat on the concrete, stared at the stars, and had our first teeth knocking in the Albany Mall car park.



My parents didn't like her. Not that I was out to them. But they didn't even like her as a friend. And so, I became good at running. Setting off in the early afternoon, I'd sprint to her place. Her Mum's: the top of a hill through a muddy duck-filled park. This one always burned my thighs. Or her Dad's, the easier run, past the bowls club and tucked into the side of a leafy fern-filled bush. Her room was a caravan parked in the front garden. She'd brew me lemongrass tea picked from the garden; we'd read books or reblog dimly lit photos. We'd make out until my phone was flooded with texts - 'rice is cold! Diiner now!'

I'd sprint back home, clutching my phone to my ear. I'd dart across zebra crossings and set new records. Lying became second nature in a household with strict requirements for the allowance of love.

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There's this moment with my family doctor I can't forget.

"I've just been idk, depressed. I get random panic attacks- it's been like since I was a kid."

"Are you stressed with your studies? I went through med school, so I understand. Are your parents putting pressure on you to succeed?"

"It's not that."

"..."

"I have a girlfriend. I'm not out to my family. They're very Chinese, very conservative, you know."



Ah. I see. I had a friend once; he's from a Hong Kong family. A bad kid! Always acting out. He kept this big secret, which tore him apart from the inside! He eventually told his Mum, and they didn't talk for years! But now they're like this! *fingers crossed* best friends!"

"...Right."

"You have a communications degree? So you must be good with words. Just communicate with them! Write it in a letter or something."

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/my heart exploded into smithereens over a phone break-up, and I'd see my ex in every tall brunette with bad posture in the streets of Tāmaki Makaurau. I needed to get out and rebound and have a hot girl summer and-/

I got my fortune read when I was 19 in this temple in Hong Kong. My childhood best friend convinced me - we'd spent the morning climbing up abandoned rooftops as sheets of washing flickered against the skyline.

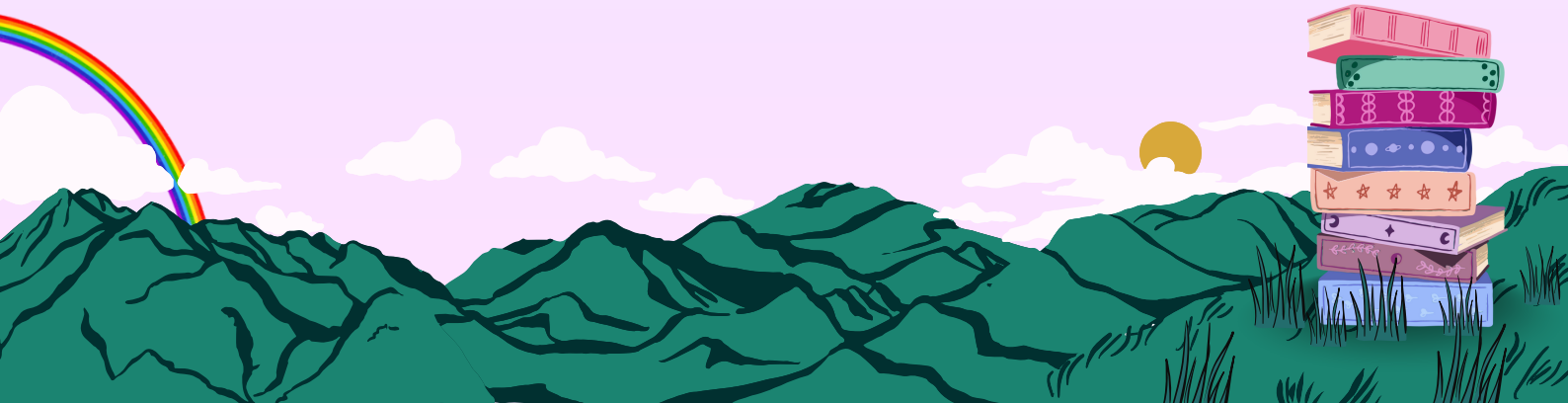
"Have you done it before? I don't know if I believe in it, but it's fun."

"I don't know what to ask."

"Just shake the sticks in the cup, and think about your question for the gods. Then the poem that falls out, that'll be the answer."

I felt silly.

"Let's find someone to read your fortune. We just gotta be careful - some of them try to scam you. So let me do the talking, yeah?"



I nodded, and we were six again. She'd made me guard the door while she snapped the plastic rulers of all our classmates. I nodded - I was scared of getting told off. But I was more terrified (and in awe) of her nerve. That's our dynamic.

I nodded politely as she fired off in rapid Cantonese. The first guy was no good. The vibes were off. We found a short Asian auntie instead.

"She wants you to hand her your sticks."

"Oh, okay, this one fell out."

"What did you ask?"

"Um, I'm confused about my career. Should I finish my law degree?"

"She doesn't understand."

"I'm torn; I also do, uhh theatre at the moment. Like acting and playwriting."

My fortune teller had a brown dust storm cloud of hair. We squatted on plastic stools in her booth. All the fortune tellers had small booths in rows around the edge of the temple. I wished I could speak Cantonese.

"She's saying that given your star sign, Wood tiger, you're terrible with money. Gold isn't attracted to you. Does that sound right?"

"I mean... sure, I'm not the best at saving."



"Oh... okay, hold on, ay? She's kinda confusing."

"Huh?"

"You're running down a dark path. With thorns. And someone, no something? Is chasing you. But it doesn't mean it's bad. It's your creative path."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"She's just the interpreter. They're all ancient poems. Maybe she misunderstood you - my translation could have been better. She thinks you want to be famous on TV or something."

"Oh, not quite. Yeah, that's not what I meant."

"She says you'll only receive recognition for your work after death. She wondered why you didn't ask about love."

"Uh... I did. I just don't know if I want to know."

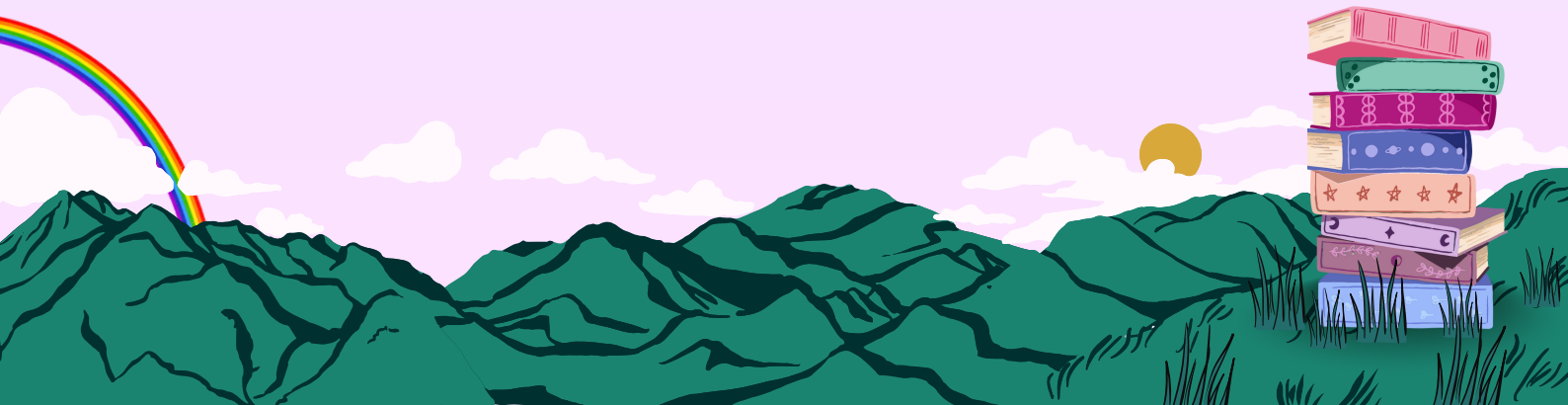
"Why not? But also, no pressure. She says she'll do it for another 20."

"um... here."

"She's sensing a change in your life."

"I just went through a breakup. Yeah, I don't know why it ended."

I do.



"She's sensing a change in your life."

"I just went through a breakup. Yeah, I don't know why it ended."
I do.

"She's asking if your boyfriend cheated on you."

"Oh um, boyfriend. Nah, I'm pretty sure not."

"She's not convinced. Also, you'll have a son."

"Oh shit. I mean uh cool."

I'm pretty sure I didn't get cheated on. It's probably cuz she thinks I had a boyfriend, but I had a girlfriend, so that threw off the star chart and ancient Chinese poems because where are the sapphic Queer poets when I need them. Fuck, did I get cheated on? Did I just waste 20 yen?

I didn't want to believe her - until she unzipped her sweatshirt and revealed Aotearoa's beloved national icon on her t-shirt—a cartoon Kiwi bird condemning my soul.

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I am in my 20s, and my heart heals and opens up again, but the run never changes.

I am in a bubble at my partner's flat during COVID-19 lockdowns. My family wants to drop off a big pot of pork bone marrow soup socially distant for winter wellness.

I am not at my flat. I am at her flat. I am sprinting to Cornwall Park.

I'm just out on a run; 我在 park? Ha it's not thaaat far from my flat. 不远.



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Once the borders opened, I run like a JesusMatyrSaint across the watery expanse of the Pacific Ocean to spend the last semester of my degree in Berkeley, California.

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Bravery -

is contagious.

A friend told me this once. She'd been watching the girls protest back home in Iran. She imagines herself as a teenager again and wonders if she would have taken to the streets. She says, Even though I'm scared, I would have

because you catch the brave from your friends.

These days - she's an artist and activist in the Bay Area, doing what she can despite the distance. Still, she worries she isn't doing enough.

We mull, and I say:

"Maybe activism and bravery aren't only physically in the streets. Like that's one way of fighting. But maybe we all try to do our fight? In our own way."

"Maybe."

At that moment, I'm self-centred, and my feelings of inadequacy ache like heartburn and my guilt for my complacency taste like bile.



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I see a pig, a beige Dorito with a gun, looming over an elderly Asian woman. She's wheeling her trolley, a pile of rags and what seems to be cereal boxes.

The cop pushes her things over. She whines. The kind of pitch that stays with you - childlike primal fear. Her partner tries to defend her in his wheelchair, his raggedy navy blue sweater, and the cop only increases in size. Her protests are pained against his bullying smirk-

I astral-project my body forwards, and I try to rattle myself to yell-

"Oi step off cunt. Leave her alone."

But I am frozen at the crossing. I am silent. Images of violent American cops on TV and my yellow-slanted eyes are stuck on his gun. I feel so foreign, my student visa alien status spinning. The blood courses through my veins - and yet I am immobile.

I spin around, and the conflict dissipates as a cyclist zips past. The cop saunters away, and the elderly couple huddle in the corner. I google on the train that there's new legislation against street vendors in San Fransisco's city centre in an attempt to clean up the area.

I used to not think twice about jumping into a hot pot to fight. But these days, I am a coward. I wonder what's ground my brave down so only sand and fingernail slivers are left.

I try to tell this story to my friends and they shrug. Yeah ACAB. Shit's racist. Maybe she's dealing. Who cares if she's dealing? Damn. We've been putting up/fighting against this for generations - take your righteous disbelief elsewhere. Do something with it.



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I'm about to hit a quarter century, and the doomsday clock clinks against my molars.

I lie to my family that I'll return to the country a week later.

I take a hot shower at my partner's flat. After six months of long distance, I am given one week of falling asleep and waking up next to her. There are five mornings to drive her to work and five evenings to chop vegetables, pan-fry chicken, steam rice, and eat dinner together.

On the final day, I Uber back to the airport from her house. I pretend I've just landed back so my family can pick me up. The run is the same - the distance is just bigger.

bravebravebrave help me grow my brave

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