

Mikee Donato – Open Division, 1st Place

Wilding Pines

Me and Esther are soul mates. She likes to say *more like we never grew up together*, as in it's hard to overstate just what massive losers we are. It's because we're from a slow place. When we were kids the days used to roll towards us like they weren't really coming, like we were a rainbow and they were a car, or like they were the end of the world and we were cockroaches, or like our life was a porno and the orgasm of tomorrow was behind a paywall. Waiting around so much, whatever we thought we wanted, when it finally swung round, was a let-down. At first, we didn't want much, just a packet of Juicy Fruit and a sachet of Raro. Then we both got pimply, our jaws ached from chewing so much gum, and we thought maybe just a cigarette, a PlayStation, a car, and a thousand dollars. That's when we met Old Mate, this geezer who was always hanging around the high school, scowling. He gave us all that stuff, said remember, now you owe me. Then we'd gotten as tall as we'd ever be so we told the sky hey man make us rich and famous, bejewelled, beloved, in love, with fat babies, old but not showing it, never sick, and dead when we feel like it. In the meantime, we made our own fun which meant Counter-Strike and fucking around. Old Mate used to say, when we got in enough trouble, *your arm's getting browner and browner*. But he liked it, and it was better to give him a good reason to slap us than to let him invent one. The way we came up, now I can tell what people think they don't want me to do before they ask me not to do it.

When we dropped out of high school, I signed the ceiling of the toilets. *I will always love the sound of breaking glass. I will always love fucking around. I was here.*

No wonder we didn't do so good when we moved to Auckland. *The Big Apple!* Esther exclaimed before immediately getting into meth and, shortly after, the emergency room. After she almost died I said to our uncle who wasn't really our uncle, well we'd better head out. We hitched south to the Bay of Plenty which also had a lot of meth. All day at this place we were squatting Esther would be walking circles in the kitchen repeating the words from that ad, *That's why I give my kids Fruit-E Bars*, and I'd be throwing things into the fire, like magazines, books, picture frames and Jenga blocks, because we didn't know where the folks who owned the place kept their firewood. So Esther wanted to get clean and we joined a rehab group in Tauranga that turned out to be a cult. It was hard having to eat so many vegetables and pray so much, but that shit works. Sure enough, Esther got squeaky and

started looking so pure with her plaits and her white dress that the man who'd taken us in tried to leave his illegal wives for her. It was nice, sitting in that sweaty guy's fancy car that smelled like pine, speeding over the limit to the abortion clinic, him holding Esther's hand in the backseat, telling me slow down, asking me who I was, if I was really Esther's brother or... what? Me and Est said to each other afterwards, on the curb, maybe that's what family feels like. Then we phoned our Old Mate up and he said his line about our brown arms and sent us money for the bus, cackling.

Old Mate died a year later, when we were holed up in a Hawkes Bay hostel with his debit card. Actually it was his daughter who called us to say she was sorry about...everything, she knew about...you know. Esther had shaved her hair and her skull looked small and her eyes humungous. When she cried I lay down beside her. I asked Old Mate's daughter what would happen with his debit card. She said she didn't know and started crying too. We listened to the traffic passing us by on both lines and felt totally contained, like we had fallen into a deep, soft hole in the universe and were decomposing into each other. I thought I could feel what every sob meant. This inhale is for when he taught her to ride a bike, this exhale is for the picture he took of her at the quarry, this choke up is for...everything. I figured I could die, it would be alright. But there were still a lot of things I wanted, like a mince pie and to go to this girl's house party where there was a swimming pool.

There in Napier, the girl must've thought I was well off because she was well off and we were in the same vintage store. I was buying Esther a fur coat and myself a leather jacket with Old Mate's debit card. She said I've been eyeing that jacket, you've got taste. Her name was Stella, it was her birthday on Saturday, if I was around.

Oh, I was around alright. We showed up a little plastered, hoping no one could tell if we kept our sunglasses on, but soon as the door opened the jig was up and we all laughed like old friends. People like you if you're easy, Old Mate taught us that. And it's easy being easy! You may as well. This one's for Old Mate, Esther said, letting herself get carried upstairs by this big rugby boy with cauliflower ears. Whoever owned the house was sorted. It had ceiling-to-floor windows and a lot of black marble surfaces, glass tabletops, silver chrome, hey what's the interior decorator word for a place that looks like a pretentious wizard lives there? Down the hall, a girl dressed like she had some place else to be came out of the bathroom. She had red lipstick, a pearl necklace, washing gloves and a silk gown on. That song by Tame Impala was playing. I went out to the balcony on the second floor and watched topless pale girls

jumping into the pool, screaming and skinny. I watched some boys in band shirts and tight jeans drinking DB and watching the girls, thought this is the life, feeling nothing, while pocketing the lighters and cigarettes people kept leaving everywhere. That song by Beach House was playing. I saw the girl in the pink gown smoking in the dining room, gloves off. I was surprised she was still around, so I went up to her and said I didn't think you'd still be here. Why not? she asked. Because of your mouth, I said, its colour, and your outfit. You think I'm overdressed. Yeah, I said. Who are you anyway? she asked. Eugene. Eugene, I like your jacket, she said, touching it, I think we're about the same size. I followed her into the bathroom. That other song by Tame Impala was playing. When it was over, I came out wearing her dress and carrying her purse and she came out in my jacket. Her name was Chloe, she was Stella's twin sister. Where are you from? she asked me. I lied and said Wellington. She was laughing. No, you're not, she said, your accent's all over the show. I wondered whether she wanted me to try again. I said happy birthday so she'd forget what I said. No, she said, I was born one minute past midnight.

I guess I fell in love for the summer because I got stupid. Every day after Chloe finished work at her aunt's boutique shop in Napier I'd meet up with her and we'd walk to the bridge out to sea. That beach was full of big chicken-egg shaped stones which made the waves loud. I never heard a thing she said at high tide. When she opened her mouth it was just rocks and static. Then we would go back to her house and have as much sex as we could before Stella got back from her job at their uncle's restaurant. Stella was hooking up with someone who gave her a lot of free weed, and we'd all sit together getting stoned in front of the TV watching music videos until evening when Chloe would get up and cook a pasta. Sometimes we played board games and they'd tell me about their childhood and their parents. They said their dad was a piece of shit but I thought he sounded alright. So what, he left their mum for a younger woman when they were five? Not everything has to be nice, that doesn't make it evil. I didn't say that out loud because I was too stoned. Their mum cried a lot, and they thought they'd grown up fast having to play therapist. The dad and the younger woman now had a son, their half-brother, who lived like a prince compared to them. After they worked themselves up about all this injustice, they'd get out a guitar and sing Fleetwood Mac songs until it got late enough for me to leave. They didn't know where I lived and they smiled when they said goodnight Eugene, get home safe. I'd never felt so safe and happy as I did in that nice house with those nice girls. On my way down the driveway, I'd keep looking over my shoulder, and it was weird and maybe it was the weed, but I was so happy I'd get giddy and

then so giddy I'd get scared, like the house was a monster chasing me. By the time I was back at the hostel, Esther really drunk or on something, rolling around on the floor, everything was normal again. About a month passed like that, then I slept with Stella and Chloe broke it off with me and Esther needed another abortion and was suicidal after someone leaked a video of her online. Like I said, I got stupid. Outside the clinic, Esther asked me how old we were again. Twenty, I told her. We were getting close to having to become real people.

We went south to Wellington and I realised yeah I didn't have that accent or the right fit. For the first few days, we were people-watching, sitting on benches, hanging out under the awnings of shops when it rained, making small talk at bus stops, practicing how they did it. After I got a sense of how to be, I took Esther shoplifting for new clothes. From this one thrift store where the staff weren't too sharp, I lifted some Levis and leather boots and Esther got a big, shapeless dress with a zany print and a tote bag that could fit a lot of groceries. We moved into a cold, damp inner-city hotel where mushrooms grew out of the walls and the whole building creaked in the wind. Most of the tenants had lived there for years because they couldn't find a real flat, either because they didn't have the money or because no one would give them a lease. We were bookended by a Filipino family and a fifty-year-old woman with three boyfriends on rotation. The woman said no landlord or property manager would give you a lease if you didn't have a job. For months, we couldn't get jobs. WINZ kept sending us to courses to improve our employability. We gained many skills, like making coffee and greeting people when they walked through a door. The Filipino family at the hotel got a black cat, which wasn't allowed, and named it Maverick. Then I became an Uber driver. I earned hardly anything and was awake through the night until 12pm the next day. People mostly didn't talk to me unless they were drunk, then they always asked the same things, how's your night going, how'd you get into this, where are you from. I'd say I was from Saturn, and they'd laugh, and I'd describe the look of the rings from inside the gaseous clouds. Esther fitted our rooms with red velvet all along the walls and on the bed and started doing videos for perverts online. She made pretty decent coin. Often, I'd go home to find her, done for the day, in the next room with the Filipinos and their little black cat Maverick who they fed their own food, sinigang and palabok and cathedral jelly on special occasions. He was a fat, lazy cat with a wary expression. Every day, he slept by the electric heater, walked in circles on the bed, and followed people into the shower which made everyone laugh. We all really loved Maverick. We bought him stuffed toys to rip apart with his claws and teeth,

and we groomed his fur with our toothbrushes. Whenever the TV was on, he made sounds like he was trying to speak a human language. The year passed and then we were 21.

On our days off, we would go to the library and read whatever. I didn't like reading much, and especially disliked books with stories because it always felt like there was some subtle lesson in them, one that was kind of lost on me. I hated the idea that everything that happened was to teach someone something, even if the thing that happened didn't teach the person it happened to anything. I didn't mind encyclopaedias, almanacs and phone books. One day, while I was flipping through a White Pages from 1992, someone tapped me on the shoulder and I flinched and looked up to see a familiar face. It was Chloe. Hello stranger, she said. We went and got a coffee and she said no hard feelings for what went down in Napier. She asked me if I had a job, I told her about Uber. God, not Uber, she laughed. If you want real work, just ask me, she said. I said yes please, I'd love a job, please give me a job. She shook her head and said I can't believe you tried to pass yourself off as a Wellingtonian, just look at the state of you. I stared over her shoulder into the glass of the café window and saw a faded image of myself with an expression on my face that was like Maverick the cat's.

The next week, Chloe got me an interview at a bar her aunt owned and soon I was wiping tables and cleaning dishes every night from 7 pm until 11 pm. On Fridays and Saturdays, bands would come to play at the bar, half of them horrible, but the other half interesting. I realised a lot of music involved complaining. Some of the songs complained about love, others about heartbreak, others about capitalism. I thought that I would be happy to experience these things deeply enough that I would be compelled to write a song about them too. What I wanted was to trespass into the world, into these people's lives. Things were going better than they had in ages, but then Maverick went missing. We – me, Esther and the Filipino family – freaked the fuck out. We printed posters with a blurry picture of Maverick and stuck them on poles all over town. We went around asking if anyone had seen him at every building in the central city. Esther cried herself to sleep imagining all sorts of horrific scenarios that Maverick could have ended up in. She said when she thought about his heart beating in terror in his little chest, she felt a guilt that made her want to die. I was hyperventilating at the bar while wiping tables and my manager thought I was crying because of a band called Church of Goya who were playing. Then Chloe walked in from whatever other gig she'd been to earlier that night and said let's get you some air. I told her what happened. She kissed me and held my hand, then we went back to her flat in Thorndon. We were together again.

Things got serious quickly between me and Chloe. She asked me to move in. I said I couldn't abandon Esther, so she said bring Esther too, we have a room free. The room was sort of shitty, but we took the deal, and soon we were living like a family, making pasta and watching *The Simpsons* and *One News* after work. Esther stopped doing her videos because my income could cover us both in the meantime. Chloe's half-brother James came by every couple of weeks, and he was a handsome, sweet young guy, nothing like the brat that had been described to me in Napier. Esther and him started going out and then it was even more like a family. I thought hard about if this was something someone would write a song about. Yeah, maybe that one band.

They took us to dinner at their dad's house in Wellington. It was a very beautiful house on a hill with a view of the south coast. The dad was a tall, thin, blonde guy with sunken cheeks and the stepmother was a tall dark-haired woman with a small, cute face. The dad's name was Lee and he shook our hands, the stepmother's name was Daisy and she hugged us. Hi, you must be Eugene, said Lee. Call me Daisy, said Daisy. The first thing Lee showed us was the sauna. The entire house was refurbished except the bathroom and sauna which retained the brown tiling and an old kind of wood that was extinct now. We went to the living room where we sat. Me and Esther didn't say much. We listened to James talk about his law papers and we listened to Esther talk about her design papers. Daisy talked about their recent trip to the island of Sifnos in Greece where a man had asked them to take care of a donkey and then he left the island and never came back so they were stuck with this donkey and when they tried to get someone else to take the donkey so they could head to their next destination, no one would because the donkey had a reputation for biting small children. Me and Esther laughed at that. James asked us if we'd ever been to Greece. Daisy stood up and stirred something in a pot in the kitchen and said it's just about ready, can you help me with the plates, Chloe? Chloe said why don't you ask James? Daisy said because I asked you Chloe. Well I won't do it, get James to do it, said Chloe. For Christ sake Chlo, said James, standing to help his mum with the plates. So childish, he said, such a fucking child. I know it doesn't mean much to you James, but it does actually matter that women aren't doing everything in the kitchen anymore, said Chloe. Whatever, said James. No, I've never been to Greece, I said. Have you done much travel? asked Lee. Well it's pretty far from here to Saturn, I said. Lee laughed the way Chloe laughed when I said I was from Wellington. I wanted to ask, What does it mean when you guys laugh like that?

The dinner Daisy made was good but not as good as Chloe's cooking. Daisy said, smiling, she's never been as good at cooking as Chloe and her mother. How's Stella? Lee asked. Fine, probably getting on the piss as we speak, said Chloe with her eyebrows lifted. It seemed that they knew what they meant. Lee noticed me and Esther didn't and explained that Stella was studying in Dunedin and had really gotten into the local culture. Chloe held my hand under the table. Esther held my other hand under the table. James had his hand on her leg. So you're a bartender? Lee asked me. No, I wipe tables, I said. That's respectable work, Lee said, sipping his wine. It is actually, said Chloe. What about you? Lee asked Esther. She was panicked. Oh I'm looking for a cat that went missing, she said. Lee smiled and said it can be difficult with cats, I've never been able to convince one that it's home, they always run away on me. How many have you had? asked Esther. Just two, said Lee. Daisy opened another bottle of wine.

We got happy drunk. Chloe said time to go but I didn't want to, I said go ahead without me. She was mad, I could tell, but I didn't know what to do with that. Chloe and James left and me and Esther stayed and drunk more wine with Daisy and Lee who told us about their summer in Europe. Lee got mugged at a club in Berlin and the next day the mugger served them at the checkout in a REWE. In Türkiye, they had the best fish sandwich of their life, and everywhere they went, guys were accosting Lee saying hey boss, we have beer, wine, rooftop bar. In Italy a man proposed to Daisy and when she said she was already married he proposed to Lee too. They argued about whether the man had really wanted them both or if he was just going through Lee to get to Daisy. They seemed to enjoy watching us get drunker. That was cool. Most people hated when we went too far, didn't seem to understand the intensity and loneliness of wanting the night to never end. Daisy said you two are adorable, how long have you known each other? Esther said we met on Saturn. Keep your mysteries then, said Daisy. Then they wanted us to get in the sauna with them, so we did, and we were so drunk we passed out and when we came to the next morning we were in their children's beds.

Chloe broke up with me soon after, and me and Esther had to move out. Because of my job, I managed to get us a room with an ensuite in a slightly nicer hotel. Esther went back to making videos, then James found out and broke up with her. We were alone together again but it wasn't so bad. I still had my job at the bar which was cool because I got to keep watching people bobbing their heads to music and spilling beer on the floor. Esther's videos were doing really well all of a sudden. Something about her had flowered, I didn't know what. Maybe it was that she was 22.

We got a phone call from a lawyer during the general election, almost didn't answer because I thought it was our old landlord asking for the payments we missed. Esther wanted us to vote for the legalise weed party. The lawyer asked if this was Eugene _____. I confirmed my name, my date of birth, and the name of my real father and mother. Your father is dead, the lawyer explained, and he has left you his house. I don't want the house, I said. Well that's up to you, but you'll need to come and sort out the paperwork anyway, he said.

I never did go to the house or sort out any paperwork. Then it was like a curse that I'd been hiding from had caught me. Suddenly they stopped giving me shifts at the bar. Esther's videos weren't doing so good anymore. We didn't have enough money to stay at the nice hotel so we moved back into the old one. The woman with many boyfriends recognised us and told us what are you doing, don't come back here! Lady, I know, I said. Is that Filipino family still around? I asked. She shrugged and said they left a while ago but she didn't know where to. Did Maverick the cat ever return? Maybe, she said. Sometimes there's a sound that's almost like a person trying to talk but she can never find where it's coming from.

We went back to visiting the library every day, doing whatever. Applying for jobs on the computers, flipping through the almanacs, checking out the City Gallery's free exhibition in the other building, getting our hair fucked up by the wind out on the waterfront. I was Uber driving again. I liked doing airport runs because the frazzled passengers often tipped me. We were surviving on half-price sushi and happy hour at Crab Shack. Everything was terrible but the months went quick. On New Year's Day, at 1 am, I did a pick-up and it was Daisy. What are the chances! she said. Wellington aye, I said grimly, which is how everyone said it. She told me about how her mother in Ireland had passed away and the funeral had to be just before New Year's. I was sorry her mother died. She touched me on the shoulder before she got out and said are you free tomorrow night? It's Lee's 60th and we're having a small get-together, the kids won't be there don't worry. I said yes, I am free.

The small get-together was us and two other couples around the same age as Lee and Daisy. It was nice to be high up on a hill overlooking the south coast again. Lee hugged us both this time and said you're looking well. Esther said that's funny. Lee didn't hear her. I thought he was on something good and hoped he'd share. We sat in the sectional couch with too many throw cushions and let people ask us questions, lying in response to every one. We were brother and sister, we said. We were half American half Scottish. Our parents were divorced and as kids we spent half the year in Omihi and the other in Hamilton. Our American mum

started her own marketing business, that's why we believed young women these days were really only holding themselves back with all this regressive self-babying. All things I'd heard people say at the bar. Lee caught me in the middle of a lie to this woman when I said I was studying design. Don't turn into Chloe, he said. Is it true she was born a minute after midnight? I asked him. Yes, he said, it was charming at the time.

So Lee shared some pills with us and we kept drinking and talking and then dancing to their vinyls until all the other guests left and then we were on the balcony watching the sun begin to rise. Esther fell asleep on my shoulder and she felt frail but warm against me. You know, Lee said, maybe sobering up in the cold, when you two were last here, you hung around so long and we didn't know how to make you leave, and I remember thinking, well how do these things usually go, and I started to think, are we going to have to fuck these guys to make them leave? He laughed. I said if you did that, you'd never get rid of us.

We walked back to town at 4 in the afternoon with our sunglasses on. It was a cloudy day, and humid. We passed kids on scooters on their way home from school and we walked through the trees and deep into the bush. I chucked an empty at a tree and listened to it shatter. We heard birds and sounds like people in the air. I laughed remembering what Old Mate used to say, and I laughed remembering everything that had happened and would keep on happening.