

Cello Forrester – Open Division, 3rd Place

## **Michael**

### *Winter*

I still think of Michael often. We first met at Grace's thirty-first birthday party. I was sitting outside on the back deck when he came out through the sliding glass doors. He was pulling a pouch from his coat pocket.

'You want a smoke?' he asked, planting himself on the bench beside me and placing a pinch of tobacco into a paper.

'Oh,' I said, 'no, I'm good.' I could see my breath. It was the shortest day of the year. I couldn't see any stars out.

'So...what? You just sitting out here?' he said, grinning, casting his eyes across the empty deck, the clothesline, the bare and wintry garden dimly illuminated in the light floating out from the house.

'Yeah, I guess so,' I said. 'Just wanted some air.'

He studied my face and gave me a funny look, then kept rolling his cigarette. I was staying for a few weeks at Grace's, she'd made up the bed for me in the spare room. I had thought about going into the room earlier, maybe getting into bed, but I'd worried about how that might come across. Sitting out here seemed more acceptable somehow. It had been quieter than the living room at least. I searched for something else to say.

'So how do you know Grace?' I asked.

'Uni,' Michael said. 'Down in Wellington.' He was trying to light his cigarette. The wind kept blowing out the flame. He unzipped his coat and ducked his head inside it. 'You?' he said, his voice muffled.

'Oh, Grace and I grew up a couple doors down from each other. Pretty close to here really – over Durie Hill ways,' I said, nodding my head in that direction.

I wasn't sure if he had heard me, half his face still buried in his coat. It was cold. It had been raining earlier that day. The conversation stopped momentarily. It was quiet. In the distance, I could hear the occasional swish of cars driving by, tyres gliding over the slick asphalt. I thought

about Taylor. I wondered what he was doing. I probably needed to start looking for a flat here. I felt exhausted.

‘I don’t think I’ve seen you before,’ Michael said, emerging from his coat with his cigarette lit, bright orange embers burning at the tip.

‘No, you wouldn’t’ve – I literally just got back. I’ve been living in Sydney for nearly ten years now.’

‘True. What’re you doing here?’

I was quiet for a moment. I didn’t really know how to respond. ‘I’m about to start working at a bookshop,’ I said, glancing at the side of his face as he took a long drag from his cigarette. He didn’t say anything. ‘That one on Guyton Street? Grace helped get me the job,’ I elaborated.

There was something of a smile then that played at the corners of his mouth. ‘Oh yeah?’ he said with a short laugh. ‘I was meaning more like what do you *do*? Like what are you interested in?’

I shrugged, I didn’t know what he wanted me to say. He took another drag. A silver plume of smoke curled up into the night air.

‘I take photos,’ he said. ‘Usually just little moments.’ He moved his hand in a wide stroke through the air, as if to show me what a moment was. ‘I’ve been thinking about, you know, what a person leaves behind. I want my photos to capture things as they really were.’

He emphasised the last four words, his voice falling to a lower register. I could feel my cheeks starting to flush. I wondered what ‘as they really were’ really meant. How could anything ever be captured as it was? It seemed reductive to me, to try to pinpoint something in this way. The conversation continued awkwardly as he described his artistic process, and I stared at him, a bit bewildered, thinking that I didn’t quite know what to make of this person, who was by this stage standing in front of me, dropping his cigarette on the deck and snubbing it out with the tip of his boot.

‘Maybe you’re a writer,’ he said, ‘you know, working at a bookshop and all.’

He started to turn and walk back into the house. There were people talking inside, a warm yellow light. Music was playing softly in the background.

‘Nice meeting you,’ he said.

## *Spring*

We went for a trip over a long weekend. We'd been seeing each other for a couple of months by then, and Michael had suggested we stay for a few nights at the place his family owned, a little weather-worn bach that sat on the edge of Lake Rotoiti up in the Bay of Plenty.

It was the photo on his bedroom wall back in his flat in Whanganui that made me realise I wanted to be with him. One evening after Grace's birthday, I ran into him on my way home from work.

'Eamon!' he called out to me. He invited me over to his place.

The photo was small, in a black frame – the only thing on the wall. I walked over to it. It was taken from inside a car, the camera lens pointing up from a low angle at the windshield. There were drops of rain all over the glass, and the flare of a streetlight outside, such that the rain seemed to glow with a force of its own. It was an incredibly beautiful image, though somehow startling, and sad.

Michael saw me looking at it.

'That's one of mine,' he said quietly.

'Oh,' I said.

On the first morning at Michael's bach, we drank coffee together sitting on the grass right by the lake. The water was very still. It reflected the sky – the colour of it, the thin and wispy clouds. I had slept badly the night before. I had woken in the middle of the night and forgotten where I was. Michael had been sleeping beside me, lying on his stomach, his back rising and falling in the darkness. The palm of his hand had been pressed into my shoulder. I couldn't figure out if he was trying to reach for me or push me away. I lay awake long enough that the light had started to seep into the room.

'I can't stop thinking about that deer,' I said, sitting at the lake's edge.

Michael looked away from the water. I could feel him watching the side of my face. I stared into my cup of coffee. 'Yeah?' he asked.

On the drive up the night before, we'd almost hit a deer. It was in the middle of the road, that stretch of State Highway 5 that heads into Rotorua, and it was just standing there, staring out into the blackness. It had been late by then, and I had watched the deer – its contours, the soft brown fur, the dark flash of its eyes – come into a quick and sharp focus in the yellow headlights. Michael had slammed on the brakes, and the car had swerved to the side of the road. My hands had reached out instinctively, pressed wide and flat across the dashboard, stopping my face from hitting it. I couldn't stop replaying the moments in my mind.

'I wonder if it was afraid,' I said. 'I've never seen one on the road like that.'

'I'm sure it'll be fine,' Michael replied. He took a sip of coffee.

The deer had darted off the road as soon as Michael hit the brakes, disappearing into a dense tangle of trees. I had peered into the darkness, searching for some sign of it, while Michael breathed heavily in the driver's seat.

'God. Its antlers,' I shook my head. 'Imagine if they'd gone through the glass.'

I looked at Michael's hands, wrapped around his cup, and then at his face. He had a beautiful profile, which was somehow entirely different from the view of him straight-on. There was something soft in it, as if it gave some part of himself away. He turned to face me.

'It didn't have antlers,' he said.

'Yeah it did,' I replied, 'I saw them.'

'Really? I don't think so.'

'I remember them,' I continued, 'like really clearly. I saw them right before we stopped the car. That's why I thought that. Like imagining them going through the windshield.'

'I really don't think it had antlers,' Michael said simply.

He finished his coffee and stood up, looking out over the water. The sun was beginning to come out through the clouds in wide silvery rays and a light wind had started to pick up, rippling over the surface of the lake. Both of us were silent for a moment. Then he said, 'I used to love coming out here as a kid.'

I looked at him.

'We'd come out in the holidays,' he went on. 'Just spending the days swimming and lying around. Or sometimes we'd come out here, just me and my dad –'

'You really don't think it had antlers,' I said.

'What?' Michael said. He seemed almost taken aback.

‘You really don’t think so?’

Michael looked at me and then back at the water. Neither he nor I said anything. I looked at my bare feet, the bright green grass beneath my toes.

I swallowed. ‘I really just think –’

Michael turned and looked down at me. ‘Oh c’mon, Eamon, does it really matter? We’re talking about a deer.’ I could feel the cool air against my face. ‘C’mon,’ he said again, gently, bending down and kissing me on the top of my head. I sighed. We both laughed. I looked up at him. His head was framed by the sun behind him, and with a kind of clarity, I decided that he was unlike anyone I had ever met, in his singularity, the absence of self-doubt, his utter conviction in his own vision. The way he arched, like an arrow, so steadily toward his future.

The weekend passed. We went swimming every day, the mid-spring water still cold, exhilarating. We ate a lot of food, Michael loved to cook, and we watched movies in the evenings, rifling through the DVD collection in the bach, lying side by side on the couch under a soft woollen blanket in the glow of the old television. On the last night, as we were drifting off to sleep, Michael told me that he loved me and I said it back.

### *Summer*

We went out to eat that night, at a restaurant that had just opened down on Rutland Street, with tables and chairs dotted around a small back courtyard. At times I could feel the way Whanganui had changed in the years that I’d been gone. New people had moved in, new shops had popped up. There was a sense of momentum, of how it might someday more closely resemble a city than a town. More often, though, I stumbled through the days with a vague and somewhat unsettling feeling that I knew this place, or perhaps that it knew me, better than I did myself – the same wide open streets I used to bike down as a child; the old Bastia Hill water tower that Grace and a few of her friends had once dared me to climb and from which I’d fallen and broken my arm. How special I had felt then, how much I seemed to at last belong, those seven weeks that I wore a cast and the kids at school would rush up to me to sign their names on its pale-blue plaster. And there was the same old boardwalk along the river, its wooden planks dark and perpetually damp,

where I used to while away the summer hours as a teenager, dreaming of a distant future, in which I was older and likeable, and always, crucially, somewhere else.

Michael was in a magnetic mood, charged and laughing widely, wearing a thin cotton t-shirt and a single silver earring. I found myself relaxed, leaning back into the rattan chair, watching Michael and his open mouth, the crooked yet somehow perfect teeth, the pink lips, the warm laughter. I looked at him and felt, with a certain weight, that I loved him with a depth that was immeasurable, almost unbearable. There was a single candle on the table, and a glass vase filled with small flowers, the petals of which had curled gently in on themselves, now that the sun had gone down, leaving the sky stained deep and purple. Michael ordered for us – large green olives, a wheel of cheese and thin slices of prosciutto, a plate of white anchovies, a baguette and a ramekin of lemon-infused olive oil. We ate slowly and drank quickly, ordering a carafe of wine, and then another, talking constantly, our cheeks growing warm, our laughter loud and flowing. Michael was asking me about the story I was working on, asking if he could read the first few pages.

‘It’s not ready yet,’ I said.

‘That’s okay,’ said Michael. ‘I’d really love to read it anyway.’

I looked at him. I picked up my fork and started moving an olive pit around aimlessly on the plate in front of me.

‘Or you could tell me about it?’ he asked. He took a sip of his wine. ‘How does it start?’

I put the fork down. ‘Well,’ I began uncertainly. I cleared my throat. ‘I think it starts in a living room, at someone’s house.’ I looked at Michael. He nodded. I continued, ‘There’s no one in it. It’s really early in the morning and there are plates all over the table. I think it was someone’s birthday or something the night before. Maybe there’s some birthday candles or something like that left on the table. Bits of crumbs, dirty dishes, that kind of thing.’ I could feel my cheeks reddening. ‘It’s more about a feeling, I guess. Because there’s this light that’s coming in through the living-room window, like this crazy morning light. Everything is kind of blue, like that light that happens just before the sun comes up, and the room’s just drenched in it. And there’s just this very lonely kind of feeling.’

I was talking very fast. I poured some more wine into my glass. I could feel my eyes growing inexplicably wet, and was vaguely aware of my heartbeat thrumming in my ears. ‘I don’t know. That’s just how I keep seeing it start,’ I said. ‘Does that sound dumb?’

The candle had burned down halfway, its light trembled across Michael's face. He looked at me. 'No, not at all,' he said, and I could feel in him the certain intensity contained within his body, a particular heat and fervour that seemed to arise from him, and which, I think, was the single most important quality that had drawn me to him in the first place.

We walked a block over to our local after dinner, where we'd said we'd meet some friends. There was music spilling out onto the footpath when we got there. Grace was standing outside with a couple of people, one I sort of knew from primary school, the other I'd only met a handful of times.

'Eamon! Michael!' Grace called when she saw us arrive. She came over and wrapped her arms around us both. She seemed a little tipsy.

'It's been ages! Where have you two been hiding?' she asked, jokingly. She and a few others had a weekly Thursday night drinks that Michael and I had failed to attend yet. 'How's everything going?'

I said we were good, told her about the dinner we'd just had at the new place down the road.

Grace nodded. She smiled a lot, she always had. 'Gosh, you're looking different, Eamon. Is that Michael's jacket?'

I looked down at myself, the worn denim jacket. I felt a sudden wave of embarrassment rising over me.

Grace poked me in the ribs. 'Merging, are you?' she teased.

The conversation moved along. Grace was about to start her third year as an English teacher at the same high school she and I had gone to. She was talking excitedly about one of the books her students would be reading for the year, a novella written from the perspective of a tree that loses all its leaves and becomes depressed, not knowing it will bloom again in the spring. This had led her off on some tangent I couldn't quite follow.

'— and it's just made me think about, you know, moving back here after uni, and worrying that I'd be unhappy or something. But I mean the rent's just so much cheaper, and the pace of life and all that.' She laughed abruptly. 'And sometimes I just think, *Look at me now*,' she went on, shifting her gaze between Michael and me, 'I've never been happier.'

I looked at her. It surprised me that she would describe herself as happy. I felt a tightness forming in my chest. Grace's eyes were bright and damp. Her body was swaying very slightly from side to side. I could remember her when we were young. She had wanted to be an actor. We used to hold elaborate plays for her parents when I'd stay over at her house for days in a row during the school holidays. She was always the main character, I'd always been the sidekick.

Grace was saying something else, something about the novella, and then cut herself off midsentence. 'Oh God,' she said, 'please stop me.' She laughed again. 'What about you, Michael, what's been happening?' she asked, changing the subject.

'Oh, you know. Things are going good,' Michael said. 'Actually, Eamon's about to move in with me.' He glanced over at me and we both smiled.

'Wow!' said Grace, raising her eyebrows and grinning wildly at the two of us. 'Is that so?'

Inside, the bar was scattered with small clusters of people, some sitting at the round tables, drinking, others playing pool. 'Everyone's over there!' said Grace, leading us to the back of the room. Michael ordered us some gin and tonics, and we sat around drinking with our friends for what felt like a long time. At one point, Michael touched the tips of my fingers, lightly, and I looked over at him, his large and beautiful face, the halo of soft hair around his head. His neck was tilted to the side and he was smiling, nodding along to something someone was saying.

Later, Grace gave us a ride home. She still seemed tipsy to me, but she told us she'd sobered up, and I didn't feel like making a thing of it. It was quiet in the backseat. Michael was leaning his head against the window, a small circle of condensation forming on the glass. I watched the sleepy suburbs of Whanganui sliding by outside, a dark blur of yellow streetlights, and then saw there, in the window, the reflection of my own two shining eyes. They looked sad and somehow hollowed. I glanced over at Grace. She was staring straight ahead. I looked down at the denim jacket. I wondered what the difference was, then, between loving someone and wanting to be made in their image. I realised I was drunk and I realised, too, pettily, that I had wanted Michael and me to walk home, that I had thought it might be more romantic, somehow, with the empty streets and the warm summer air, and our love for each other, the trees so full and bursting with life.



## *Autumn*

We were walking along the path next to the river. It was late autumn and though the sun was out, the weather was cool. Michael was wearing a scarf he'd picked up at the SaveMart the week before. It was fuzzy and colourful, its knitted wool moth-eaten and smelling as though it had been forgotten in someone's drawer for many years. Something about it made me uneasy. I looked away from the scarf and ahead of me at the river and the people walking along its banks, the piles of brown and yellow leaves. The sky was wide and cloudless, a pale, if almost uncertain, blue, it seemed. Michael had his camera with him. He took a picture of our feet mid-step against the pavement, and another of the nearly bare English oaks against the backdrop of the sky. The sun was shining through the branches. I stopped walking and closed my eyes. I could feel the sun's warmth faintly on my face, and I pictured, suddenly, the tree in the backyard of the house I'd grown up in, just across the river from where Michael and I stood, how it had once seemed to rise from the earth like something ancient and powerful. How the setting sun used to fall through its leaves, divided in this way into so much more light. How differently I had once thought my life would turn out.

Michael had wandered down the slope to the riverbank. I considered briefly, almost dizzily, the way a thing is shapeless until given shape. I wanted to tell Michael about the tree in the backyard. About the sun, the leaves. I had no idea how. He was taking a picture of the river, a spot where the sun was glaring against the surface of the water.

'Eamon!' he called to me. I walked over to him. 'Stand here,' he said.

I stood on the grass beside the muddy water. He placed his hands on my shoulders and moved me a fraction to the left.

'There,' he said softly.

He took a few steps back from me, brought the camera to his face. He peered through the viewfinder and adjusted the focus. I heard the camera click and the roll start to whir.

'That was the last shot,' he said.

He was smiling at me. He looked so beautiful, his cheeks flushed deeply in the brisk autumn air. I imagined for a second how the photo would turn out, the Whanganui River and its light, the grassy bank, the autumn leaves. But I could not, for some reason, see myself in it.

Michael walked back up to the footpath. I made my way slowly up the bank behind him. I looked down at the grass, at the impressions my shoes left behind in the sodden earth. A couple of pīwakawaka flew by overhead. They were singing, twittering. It sounded like they were laughing at me. My hands felt damp. Michael was slipping his camera back into the case. I felt somehow quite far away.

I was nearly back at the footpath when I heard myself saying, 'I don't really want to be with you anymore.' I said it quickly, without thinking, and surprised even myself, first at the bluntness of my words and then at their utter falsity. I still don't know why I said it. I doubt I had ever let myself get so close to another person up until that point. I'm not actually sure that I have since, either.

At first Michael laughed, in that way of his, and then, turning to me, seeing the expression I wore across my face, he stopped in the middle of the footpath. He stood with his hands at his sides, one clutching at his camera case, the other with the fingers spread open, palm facing up toward the sky.

'What do you mean?' he asked.

I wondered how I might reply, how I might possibly begin to explain to him the sensation – the one that has followed me all my life – of wanting to be somewhere else.

'It's just a feeling,' I said, weakly.

I was about to elaborate when he started speaking, saying that we should just head home and talk things over. Then, almost desperately, he reached for me. I could feel the astonishing warmth of his hand against mine. I replied quietly, something about how I'd already made up my mind.

Michael cried that night, sitting on the edge of the bed, wearing only his underwear and saying he did not feel the cold, even though the flat was growing chilly and there were goosebumps forming all across his skin. I had seen him cry only once before, back in the spring, the morning we were leaving his family's bach. We were in his car, parked in the driveway overlooking Lake

Rotoiti, when I glanced at him. He was sitting very still, his hands gripped tightly around the steering wheel.

‘Shouldn’t we get going?’ I asked. The sky was dark that morning. I was worried the rain would be heavy on the drive back.

Michael said nothing at first. Then he let out a long jagged breath. ‘I’m sorry,’ he muttered. His voice sounded strange. ‘I – I should’ve said,’ he started and then stopped. I looked at him, his hands on the steering wheel, the fine hairs spread across the knuckles. ‘I haven’t come out here since my dad died,’ he said softly.

The air was still. He’d never told me about his father. I really can’t remember what else we said, sitting there in his car, I can only recall him half-turning to me with this sort of sad, lopsided smile on his face and then wiping his eyes with the backs of his hands.

The light was becoming fainter and fainter in the flat, but neither Michael nor I made any move to turn on the bedside lamp. I paced around the room, taking my clothing off the hooks from the long silver rack and dropping them into the small black suitcase I had so recently unpacked.

I went into the bathroom and collected my moisturiser, my contact solution. I was surprised by how little I had. Nearly everything was Michael’s. I paused in the hallway, realising the ease with which I had folded my life into his, the ease with which I was always folding my life into someone else’s. Hearing, then, the low rumble of Michael’s voice, I followed it back into the bedroom. He was lying with the pillow over his face.

‘I can’t hear you,’ I said. ‘I honestly fucking hate it when you talk at me from the other room.’ I feel a flash of shame whenever I think of that moment now.

Michael murmured something again. ‘What did you say?’ I asked.

He lifted the pillow momentarily from his face and said, his voice coarse and breathless, ‘I just don’t understand why you’re doing this.’

I went over to him, perching lightly on the corner of the bed. I glanced up at the wall, at the photo of his that hung there – the drops of rain that glistened on the windshield, lit up by the streetlight – then turned and looked back down at him. I didn’t know what else to say. He let the pillow drop back down over his face. The light was so faded by then that it illuminated his body in a melancholy shade of blue, and rendered him, somehow, like a still life, or a portrait. The supple flesh that spilled over from his underwear; the unruly hair that crawled up to his navel; his

hands, so large and soft, pressed flat across the pillow. Feeling suddenly uncomfortable, as though his body were no longer mine to observe, I got up and finished packing my suitcase.

Later, we both stood before the bathroom mirror brushing our teeth. It seemed to me that things had somehow calmed. I'd packed up all my stuff. I would sleep on the couch that night, I'd leave in the morning. I looked at our reflections, how familiar our bodies had become with the other. How vulnerable love could leave a person, how open and disarmed. Michael caught my eye in the mirror.

'What do you make of me?' he asked, his mouth half-full of toothpaste.

'What do you mean?' I answered impatiently.

'What do you make of me, Eamon?' he asked again, bending forward and spitting into the sink.

His voice was raw. It still cuts at me.

'You don't care what I make of you,' I replied.

It is sad to me, how frequently we cannot grasp the way things are until so long after the fact. I looked at Michael, at the side of his face, his profile, its softness. People wear all sorts of masks. It was only a decade later – that bright December morning when I received a call from Grace, her voice flat and listless, her three children yelling somewhere in the background of the house she and her partner had bought in Whanganui East, while I sat at the kitchen bench in my apartment, staring out the window at the naked trees trembling in the freezing London air, and I heard her telling me of Michael's passing – it was only then that it finally did occur to me how different things might have looked, the way it was for him.