

Mikey - 2979 words

Where Mikey comes from, people do not go to university. Where Mikey comes from the smart ones become tradies who run their own businesses, and the dumb ones become dole bludgers or worse, meth-head dole bludgers with six kids.

Mikey likes to think he is way smarter than that though. Not as smart as Stella, but pretty bloody smart, and Principle Callavero thought so too. Principle Callavero wanted more for him than the best apprenticeship in the area, more than the IT degree he was looking into at Western Sydney. Good facilities and an achievable entry mark, but still over an hour commute each way.

“Michael, if you’re planning to travel out that far, I think you can make it a few extra stops to Redfern, don’t you?”

He had shrugged, not knowing what she meant by it. Not until she slapped scholarship forms down in front of him for the University of Sydney, and told Mikey *exactly* what he was capable of, if he would kindly take his head out of his arse. Principle Callavero could be blunt with them like that.

She coaxed Mikey into applying for a new program for underprivileged students at Sydney University, the Clarke Wildley Hammond Scholarship. To Mikey, it sounded less like his ticket to a *better future* and more like a cranky old white guy, but Principle Callavero emailed the Dean herself and requested special consideration be given to their best and brightest, given the immeasurable loss he had recently suffered.

She told him the CWH Scholarship was designed for students with excellent raw marks, whose low socio-economic backgrounds meant they were destined to be disadvantaged by the New South Wales academic scaling system. Mikey was pretty shocked to discover that even though his marks were damn good, he was up against the scaling of one of the worst performing public schools in the state. No one had even told them that some subjects are automatically graded better than others, how slack was that?

He wrote his application essay, red/raw and from the heart. Not because he wanted to, but because he could hear Stella’s voice telling him he had to, all day, everyday, until eventually he did as she instructed.

Principle Callavero sent it off, one hour before the closure, and they waited. Waited, and prayed. Damn, do his people know how to pray.

Every morning over their *kafés* his mum would remind him.

“Yiayia’s whole church is praying, agapi mou.” *My love.*

“Yeah, Ma, I know.”

He tried to escape to his grandparent’s place for a good feed, and because he thought his head would explode if he spent another minute in that house, but he would just cop it again there.

“Mikey, everyday I pray you! My whole church pray you!”

“Nai, Yiayia, entáxei.” *Yes, Grandma, okay.*

Mikey swears the Greeks only become more dramatic as they age.

If he was prone to drama, to the theatrics of prayer and hope, his stomach would have been flipping over with nerves every second in those last few weeks before he received the acceptance email.

But Mikey is not prone to things like prayer and hope, or the dramatics of the Greeks. He wants to tell them all that making deals with the universe is some useless bullshit. Wants them to know there is no higher power to grant mercy, and God knows Mikey could do with a little mercy.

Somehow though, of over three hundred applicants in the state, Mikey is the one who gets an offer. Gets himself all the way into The University of Sydney Law School, despite being four marks away from the official ATAR entry score. On a full scholarship no less, thanks to old mate Clarke Wildley Hammond.

On orientation day his tutor goes around the room and has them all introduce themselves, and Mikey cannot help noticing that most of the people in his course already know each other.

When Mikey points this out to the girl seated next to him, she explains that they basically all went to the same three private schools. On the North Shore, that is.

"Hey, at least you don't have to worry about running into everyone you went to high school with!"

As though he is somehow the lucky one here.

By the time he gets home, Mikey is a tight coil of frustration. Accidentally wakes his mum up as the front door slams behind him.

"Sorry Ma."

"Ah, just Mikey."

He never used to be *Just Mikey*. He used to be *Mikey and Stella*. For four years, he was Mikey and Stella.

But now Mikey knows loss. That is what everyone keeps calling it, *loss*, as though maybe he could win the next one, or maybe she will be returned one day.

He likes the word grief better. The sound of it in his mouth, less round, more pointy and painful. More fitting, in Mikey's opinion, given the way grief turns air itself into shards of glass. Given how, on the really bad days, simply breathing in will shred your insides.

Throat, oesophagus, stomach, intestines. He lies in bed and lists them off.

Pancreas, liver, appendix, rectum.

In year twelve, Mikey was a gun at biology, ranked number one in his grade. Now he cannot remember the right order. Cannot remember lots of things, these days.

He wanted to study science at one point, then decided he liked the idea of arguing for a living better. Mikey is good at arguing, always has been. Their school never had a debating team but he reckons if they did, he would have aced it.

When he was younger he brought it home sometimes, that seething feeling. The protests which leaped out of his chest when the refs made a shit call at Saturday footy, the venom for those private school muppets who called out to them from across the train tracks.

Snapping at his Mum. Kicking over plants in their backyard. Throwing his Playstation controller at the wall. Breaking things, yelling.

When that happened, Stella was the only one who could stop him in his tracks.

We have to fight enough wars out there in the world Mikey, this is the one place we can choose peace. Don't take that away from yourself.

Ghandi may as well have been a seventeen year old girl from Greater Western Sydney, as far as he was concerned.

In a class on *Social and Cultural Capital*, the lecturer draws a bright red divide across a map of Sydney, calling it a *Poverty Line*.

Mikey feels the walls melting down around him. Watching his entire life, everyone he has ever known, all of himself, fall on the wrong side of that fucking red line. Around him the other students stare blankly, bored and disconnected.

A few rows ahead, someone hits *Purchase Now* on a fluffy purple jumper, and ninety-five dollars goes to ASOS.

And Mikey knows that no matter how far he travels in life, he will always carry this moment. Not close to his chest, but dragging heavy behind him.

Stella's favourite game was *More Than*.

Do you love me more than Yiayia's moussaka?

Yes.

Do you love me more than the Panthers winning the Premiership?

Yes.

Do you love me-

Yes, he would interrupt her, I love you more than that, too.

And he did. More than his dog Achilles. More than his Playstation. More than footy. More than his best mates. More than that feeling of pure elation when he received the top marks in the grade. More than his Yiayia's cooking. Maybe even more than he loved his own mother.

Yes, Mikey would say to her, More than anything, always.

There are twenty-one stations between his home and Redfern, Mikey counts them off systematically as they pass. Fifty-five minutes, twice a day, four days a week. He spends a fortune on public transport, even with a concession Opal card.

Mikey knows he should use this time to do his readings, but wants to see the decline in scenery, wants to notice how the people and the landscapes change. Wants to watch in real-time as everything around him descends into the case studies of meth-heads from Shitsville in his shiny new textbooks.

Wants to know all the ways in which he is *Less Than*.

Mikey takes to sleeping at other people's houses. On Friday night he stays with a mate after footy practice. They are in *The Shed* with the rest of the team, which is really just somebody's garage, pimped out with old couches and a mini-fridge, exclusively for playing video games, drinking beer, and getting stoned out of their minds.

They chop up mounds of weed and tobacco with expert precision, thin fingers working quickly until the bowl is full. Mikey grabs the bong and breathes in and in and in. It feels nice, going numb like this. Neither peaceful or angry, just nothing. Just blank.

Inside his head, Mikey is telling them that there is no point to this life. That everything good is taken away from you, and maybe everything good was never real to begin with, and the whole thing is just a big, fucked up trick.

He is so stoned, too stoned maybe, and everything is so foggy, and he is having trouble separating thoughts and speech. And shit, did he maybe just say that out loud?

Suddenly he is freaking out, trying to suck the words back in, trying to control the dribble of misery leaking out.

He looks over at his mates in panic, but the boys are calm. Thumbs rhythmically hitting the controls, tongues hanging out the sides of their mouths. Unfazed by his word vomit.

Hey, you can't think like that right now, Mike.

It's just the bud talking, Mike, you're all good.

Yeah man, I'm good. You're right, it's just the bud.

And so if it is or isn't, it is.

And so somehow, another week without Stella slowly passes.

Later, Mikey will blame it on the loud-mouthed *malaka* from the other team, the one who once called him a *dirty Wog*, who has the nerve to gloat when the ref completely misses a knock-on, or chooses to ignore it, more likely.

It is the semi-finals, a crucial match, and this call costs them the win.

Within the roars of anger from the crowd, Mikey can hear all the sounds of his entire life. Achilles howling and new babies crying and Stella moaning, and his Yiaia praying softly in church while the priest chants in Ancient Greek, half singing, half speaking. A cacophony of broken noise, and all the air being sucked out of his lungs at once.

And as that *malaka's* blood spits through the air, as his fist crunches against jaw and his coach hurtles across the field towards them at lightning speed, Mikey cannot help but think that perhaps he has inherited the dramatics of the Greeks, after all.

After *The Incident*, his mum makes him see a psychologist, Dr Catherine, who makes him go to a grief group on top of that. Every bloody Friday night, right after footy practice.

Someone there tells him to write Stella letters.

"I do it at my husband's grave. I sit there and write to him, then I burn them over his tombstone."

Mikey thinks it all sounds a bit morbid, sitting in a graveyard alone, burning things.

"And then what?"

"Nothing. Ashes to ashes. It really helps me."

He wonders if she is a pyromaniac.

"Uh, thanks. Maybe I'll try it sometime."

His mum raises an eyebrow, doubtful.

Dr Catherine tells him when he gets that bubbling feeling, to try and focus on one thing, just one single thing that he has total control of in that exact moment. Like the ability to chew his food, to swallow. To place one foot in front of the other and walk. She tells him to build routines, and stick to them.

"Create routine, and you create calm."

She gives him a laminated chart with cartoon pictures, one column for every day of the week, broken down into sections.

Morning. Early Afternoon. Late Afternoon. Evening. Night.

Like Mikey is no longer competent at being a person. Like he is a bloody kindy-kid.

When his Yiayia calls, Mikey immediately knows she has spoken to his mum, that dirty dibber-dobber.

"Agapi mou, why you no come stay with me and Pappou for a while, eh?"

"Yiayia, I'm fine—"

"House too quiet, you and Mama so far away. Come."

"Ok. But I'm bringing Achilles."

So Mikey goes to stay with his grandparents in Burwood, and marvels at his first sleep-in in months. It takes just twenty minutes to get to university, and he never has to deal with the trainline, or its arbitrary markers of failure.

Mikey is surprised to see a photograph of him and Stella has been blu-tacked to the fridge, standing on the school oval during their final week. Stella grinning at the camera, hand on hips, and Mikey gesturing to her year twelve jersey which reads *Stella Artois*. Little wonder it is his favourite beer.

His Yiayia and Papou were charmed by Stella's efforts to learn Greek. Charmed by her neverending compliments and her beautiful straight smile. Charmed by her knee-length skirts, cardigans and ballet flats, blouses buttoned up all the way to her neck, (usually hiding a hickey from their beloved grandson), all completely foreign articles in her regular, everyday rotation of jeans and crop-tops.

Very good Stella, your Greek very good!

Mikey wills himself not to think of it, mortified at the prospect of having a breakdown in front of his Yiayia, and sticks his cartoon chart over the top of the photograph.

Therapy does not necessarily make Mikey feel better, but he finds Dr Catherine was right, he does like the routine. Likes having somewhere set to be after class which is not *The Shed* or watching Greek soap operas on the couch with his Yiayia. Likes that Achilles now knows to wait by the door at seven in the morning and seven at night for walks. Likes the rhythm of making coffee on the stove with his Papou, how his Yiayia always lays two reusable coffee cups out on the bench, waiting.

Morning. Early Afternoon. Late Afternoon. Evening. Night. Five ticks for Mikey.

Dr Catherine agrees with the grief group woman about writing letters.

"Cathartic," she calls it, and "therapeutic."

"If writing letters is so therapeutic," Mikey asks sourly, "what's my mum paying you so much for?"

Dr Catherine laughs at that one, and asks him how he has been sleeping.

One night he hears a strange noise echo down the hall, and at first Mikey is sure a baby is whimpering, but wanders out to find his Yiayia crying alone at the kitchen table.

Mikey's mum loves to say, *The kitchen is the heart of the household*, and he cannot help thinking about that as he watches his Yiayia's shoulders delicately shudder. Her tiny frame rising and falling, and rising and falling again.

He wants so badly to reach out and comfort her, but simply has no idea how. So Mikey goes back to bed, sobbing in the dark, scrolling through Stella's Instagram page, all the way back to her very first post, that one of the two of them, fourteen and pimply-faced on a park bench.

He fears for what is to become of them all, living in this strange Stella-less world, this post-apocalyptic place. For Mikey, Stella is still the beginning, middle and end. The main character in the highlight reel of his entire adolescent life, intertwined in everything he has done, and everything he has ever wanted to be. He wishes he had brought some weed here to calm himself down. Shit, he really has lost it now, to even consider smoking dope at his Yiayia and Papou's place.

The Stella on his screen smiles her perfectly straight smile, and Mikey wonders if it is weird to look at a dead person's nudes. Wonders if it is weirder still under his grandparent's roof, with his Yiayia crying in the kitchen. Instead he calls Stella's voicemail, his heart curling into the phone as she tells him, *Hey, I'm not here right now...*

In his dreams tonight Mikey sits in a car park smoking. Every cigarette he lights is the last one in the packet. Everytime he takes a drag he is immediately down to the filter. Time flickers backwards and forwards. He is finishing school again, he is starting university again, he is quitting his old job, he is winning the footy grand finals. He is with her, he is leaving her, he is begging that she stay.

He is sitting in a car park, trying to smoke a whole cigarette. Trying to start his life over, trying to arrive at a different ending.

His Yiayia makes Mikey's favourite foods for dinner every night, and packs the leftovers neatly into containers for lunch the next day. She walks him to the bus stop in the mornings and insists on topping up his Opal card and Mikey knows, she is saying sorry.

He is surprised to find himself going back to the graveyard over and over to lie above Stella in the dirt, surprised he finds some stillness amongst the ghosts and the grass. When his bones begin to ache from stiffness, he imagines she is reaching for him through the earth.

To Mikey, life still smells like Stella's dirty laundry and tastes like her breath in the mornings, and the next time he finds his Yiayia crying alone in the kitchen he holds out his phone, hand trembling in the air, and shows her a video of fifteen year old Stella taking out first place in the inter-school cross country. Smile wide, chest out, golden hair streaming behind her like a flame.