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## Strawberry Reservoir

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Claire Mikeson



Strawberry



Reservoir

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At the funeral all I could think about was Molly Ringwald. I couldn't stop staring at the picture above the casket, and I kept thinking to myself, cry damn it, cry, they're all staring at you. I mean, she's playing in some show on ABC Family, and she still has the red hair and all, but it's weird, like she shouldn't exist outside *The Breakfast Club*. It just doesn't fit. Jesus, I wish I could have just cried like everyone else, but the best I could do was stare at Rowan in that picture. His mom took it this summer, and if the angle had been wider I'd be in there too. He was sitting on their lawn in the picture, holding his guitar. He'd been playing no song in particular. He was looking sideways, looking at me past the wooden frame and smiling. He looked so ethereal, I could practically see the edge of a halo poking out under all that brown hair he was always trying to hide it with. I know I've never smiled like that. I don't know, but that casket just made me think of Molly Ringwald at forty-five.

Right after the funeral service Rowan's grandma came up to me and said, "What a strong girl for not crying!" Her curved spine was trying to poke through her black dress. I tried to look straight into her cataracts and only her cataracts, but I think she caught me glancing at her spine, all hunched up like her mom never made her drink a glass of milk in her life. I told myself, "Don't look at her spine, don't look at her spine" but it was so goddamn awkward and then I just had to look at it. I turned my head, expecting to meet Rowan's eyes, see the mutual smirk on his face, but then I remembered. When we were friends in elementary school, before my boobs and his deep voice, we used to call her "the dinosaur" and run around like we were raptors. When you're small you don't realize that you'll be old too and that kids will laugh at your reptilian qualities someday. Most teenagers don't realize it either I guess, but I stopped calling her

“the dinosaur.” Out loud anyway. I still look at her spine, but real sneaky, so on the off chance that there’s a God and he’s watching he might miss it, or at least notice my effort and maybe not send me to hell. I guess Rowan doesn’t have to worry about that anymore, about being a reptile. I still do though.

His grandma had wrinkled her scaly face in an effort to look sympathetic. She squeezed my hand with her bony fingers, but I could tell she hated me. I could tell she wanted to stab her long lumpy yellow nails straight through my palm because I couldn’t even cry at her grandson’s funeral. I could picture it, blood spurting from a crescent-shaped hole in my hand, her head back, cackling, “That’s what you get you little bitch!” She didn’t, but I know she wanted to. I wanted to explain to her that I tried to cry but I couldn’t because of Molly Ringwald. I wanted to tell her I had cried myself completely dry already and if she flipped me inside out my organs would be all cracked and dusty like salt flats.

That’s how my organs felt, but they must’ve still been working fine since I wasn’t dead. And I’m pretty sure your guts don’t ooze out salty tears, but I felt heavy and drippy inside for days, like the air was squishing all the wet out of me. And then after a while it stopped so I just figured there wasn’t any more wet left in my body at all. But I still wondered a few times if I might be dead too, just lying there finding paint pattern pictures on the bathroom ceiling. Except my mom kept coming in just to look at me, nervously fingering whatever small gem hung from her short silver chain at the indentation in her neck where they give you tracheotomies. I could tell she was always trying to think of something to say. She kept opening her mouth with a sharp inhale, and I’d wait and hear her shut it again, exhaling as she bit her little round lip. I wanted to tell her to shut up, that she was breathing too loud, but I just laid there real still so she’d think I was dead or something and leave. Sometimes she’d say, “Devyn, sweetie, you might feel a little better if you just got up off that hard floor,” or, “Devyn, honey, maybe you’d feel better after a hot shower.” It was true, after about forty consecutive hours the bathroom floor was feeling pretty damn hard, and I wasn’t exactly the poster child for good hygiene. My clothes and hair had dried

after the first few hours, but they were stiff and made crunchy sounds whenever I moved. And I still smelled like lake water.

Last night I stood up and turned on the shower and stepped in, fish clothes and all, and I washed away the Strawberry Reservoir smell. It was ridiculous, it was so goddamn ridiculous, but I couldn't help thinking that whatever was still left of alive-Rowan in that dried up reservoir water was slipping down those round, black drain holes, screaming at me in a tiny, algae-coated voice. I waited to cry but, you know, dust guts.

Maybe it's completely normal to think of weird, old Molly Ringwald at your boyfriend's funeral. I mean it sure as hell seemed like a better alternative to picturing Rowan inside that closed casket. The casket was flawless, shiny mahogany like it even mattered, like it was going to sit there in the church forever with his picture on it. But it didn't. They took it to the cemetery and piled shovel-fulls of dirt on it. I watched, and I felt sort of nauseous and claustrophobic, and when I got back to the car with my parents I puked in the parking lot.

"Oh god, honey," my mom said as she pulled out a Kleenex and a mint from the dark abyss of her purse. "You don't have to go to that reception. Just come home with us Devyn." I had to go to the reception.

The reception was at Rowan's house, and when I got there everyone was ambling around making small talk through mouths stuffed with cookies. They were admiring the color scheme of Sloane's living room, commending her bold paint choices. They were telling her how sorry they were, what a good boy Rowan had been, what a loss to her it was even though "God gained an angel." I got that twitch in my fingers, the one that says, "Punch someone Devyn, punch someone right in the head," but I just squeezed my thumbs instead. Sloane managed a polite smile, and it didn't even look contrived.

Mourning was a good look for her. I mean, her skin always looks like milk anyway, but it practically gleamed with tragedy. I became self-conscious of my own pasty skin, without even bright hair or light eyes to compensate. She wore a tight black satin dress on her skinny six-foot body—classy tight, not slutty

tight—and she had put a lily from the funeral bouquet in her short Coke-can-red hair. Even though I'd showered I still had that special look that you can only get after marinating in fishy lake juices for a couple of days. I was wearing the only black dress I owned, sweating in long sleeves in August. And I was wearing my mourning underwear. After my shower I decided that that's exactly what they would be, my mourning underwear, the oversized, red Christmas ones with tiny nutcrackers all over them. Putting them on was always like a guarantee that I wouldn't be getting any for the next twenty-four hours. Rowan never seemed to care though. Every time he slipped them off, rolled them down my thighs, knees, ankles, I would laugh and tell him I thought a little less of him. I stood there, watching Sloane, at one end of the cookie table with my friends. They tried not to make eye contact.

You know those girls born with innate hugging abilities with the huge perma-smiles to match their huge white teeth? I've never been one of them. I don't even consider myself to be sub-par at it. I hug like shit, and I usually stay safely out of hugging range with my arms crossed. But I left my friends and went and hugged Sloane, probably mostly because I didn't really know what the hell I was supposed to say to her. When we let go I was probably squinting, I was looking so hard in her eyes for blame. Jesus, they were bluer than I'd ever seen them, a nice shade of no-matter-how-much-you-loved-Rowan-you-will-never-miss-him-like-I-do indigo. They didn't scream that though, like eyes sometimes do scream things. They stated it, subtly, tactfully—and they were probably right. Still, I was a little jealous of all the attention she was getting from those fat funeral women. They only glanced at me, whispering with their shriveled lips in between bites. Sloane kissed the top of my head, and I left.

When I got home I turned on the hot water so my mom wouldn't ask me how I felt again, and I spent another hour on the bathroom floor looking out the window. The warm fog crawled to its outer corners. That's what clouds are made of. I never thought of that before, that clouds are just water spread way out. You probably wouldn't even be able to feel a cloud. You'd think it'd be fun to sit on one; they look so puffy and comfortable, but really you'd fall right through.

When you're swimming in Strawberry Reservoir you can see the sky, the clouds at night. I mean, once you're actually in the water without all those trees around. There's none of that Provo pollution, just stars with sharp edges. You can float on your back and see the sky and pretend that all there is is sky—that's what being a fetus must feel like, or heaven. The first time we swam there in June Rowan got real quiet and just stared at the water. After a minute he grinned and said, "Look Dev, the stars are melting." He ran his hand through one of the water stars and we both watched it shatter softly into white ripples. He was concentrating so hard he made me laugh. "Apparently you don't understand the significance of melting stars," he told me. It was so dark out, but I could see his eyes squinting up, teasing me.

"Apparently I don't," I said with the same feigned condescension. I pressed my body against his in the water and found his mouth, kissing him so hard our teeth hit. I loved the way his eyes watched those melty stars. His legs kept treading, harder, straining to support my weight. They were warm when they brushed against mine. It always surprised me to touch him, that he was solid. He was more like air than a cloud seems, and I guess half the time I expected him to dissolve, you know, dissolve in my fingers into a million tiny bits I couldn't feel. He was never really here in the way I'm here or even Sloane, the artist Sloane, is here. Rowan would be able to pinpoint that floating fetus feeling—I think it's all he knew—but that's the best I can describe it.

The bathroom window was white with mist, and I was sweating through my black dress. I heard my parents arguing outside the door.

"Well don't you think we should go in there?"

"Come on Corine, just let her be," my dad answered back.

"I'm worried about her, and you know when I open that door she's just going to be lying on the floor again. She needs us. She's just too damn stubborn."

"She'll talk when she wants to talk. For Christ's sake, you don't even know what to say to her."

I turned off the water and heard the wood floors creak as they hurried back to the kitchen. When I walked in they were

sitting at the table, still in their funeral clothes. They ignored the fact that I was still in mine.

“Devyn, honey, are you okay? How are you feeling? What a beautiful service that was! That picture of Rowan just captured him so well...” my mom trailed off, realizing that the pile of words in her stomach had suddenly dwindled, that they might not even get her anywhere. She nervously patted the curls at the back of her auburn hair. They were stiff with hairspray. She glanced at my dad then back to me, expecting someone to say something, but I just looked at her. I told her I was going for a bike ride.

“In your nice dress?” She furrowed her dark, immaculate eyebrows and scrunched up her lipstick lips—her concerned face. It was the same face she gave to Rowan whenever he refused to eat a third helping of her shepherd’s pie. She looked like she wanted to punch me or braid my hair. I couldn’t tell.

As I swung one leg over my bike she screeched from the doorway, “Honey everyone will see your underwear!” She paused then went on, “I wish you would talk to me about this!”

For the forty-some hours on the bathroom floor I couldn’t not think of him green. I couldn’t not think of him dark green and suspended like some science project in a jar. It was like when you stare at a bright light and then close your eyes, but the light’s still there in the wrong color. Even when you squeeze your eyes so tight you see it, and it follows your pupils around. All I could see was dark green, a black body, floating hair silhouetted from above by ripply water light. Really, I don’t know how it happened, and I never actually saw Rowan like that, but it was tattooed on my retinas anyway. I mean, you see all these paintings of that one chick in Hamlet who drowned, like it’s supposed to be so god-damned pretty, but I couldn’t stop classifying him with formaldehyde cow eyes and fetal pigs.

I was lying on the wooden dock next to him. We’d just had sex in the grass and gone swimming in the lake. I guess it’d sound more poetic if we had sex on the dock, but the wood was so old I’d get splinters. It was nice to just lie on it though. Rowan turned on his side, pressed his hand in the puddle under our

naked bodies then traced his dripping fingers down my spine. As the goose bumps erupted all over me he laughed. “You can really be a dick sometimes, you know that?” I told him and dipped my hand over the edge of the dock and flicked water on his side. The tiny white hairs on his skin poked up straight, catching little water orbs that followed the creases of his abs to the gray wood of the dock. He stood up, jumped over me, cannon-balled into the water. I yelled at him for splashing me, told him to get back out, it was warmer with him next to me. He always had these theories, all these theories he’d tell me. “You know what Dev, humans long intrinsically for warmth. Even in the summer.” At the time I hadn’t known what the word “intrinsic” meant. But I mean, of course humans want that. I don’t know if there was something more to it or if he was just always bullshitting me because I liked to hear it, liked the way his head fit in my lap. He made everything sound so damn vital.

He didn’t get back on the dock though; he told me he was going to swim for a little longer. I woke up around four, cold.

Mom came into the bathroom sometime Thursday afternoon and told me Sloane was in the kitchen to see me. I stayed there real still. A few minutes later she came back and told me Sloane thought I’d want to know about the autopsy. She said the doctor had said that these things happen and that they happen pretty quickly. When someone starts to drown it’s usually silent. They don’t call out because they use all their energy trying not to go under. She said even though Rowan was pretty strong, pretty athletic, he wasn’t a great swimmer. He got tired is all.

It was true, I guess. He’d never taken swimming lessons. He’d get a little offended when I made fun of him for not being able to do the front crawl, but sometimes he’d do this thing where he swam like a squid because it made me laugh so hard. He was always a little awkward in the water, but he knew how to swim. It didn’t make any sense. I wanted someone to scream at, to scream, “Why did you do that?” It could have been anybody else, anybody.

When I woke up alone there on the dock I yelled for him. I yelled

his name and laughed. Then after a minute, I yelled again and told him he wasn't being funny anymore. I screamed his name, screamed that he was scaring the shit out of me. I dove off the dock and kept screaming and crying and spinning around in the water to see where he went, but there wasn't enough light. I couldn't see anything.

I drove the pickup back to Sloane's, going about ninety the whole way, and the drive was shorter than it'd ever been. When I got there the front door was locked and I hit it, kicked it until Sloane opened it in her underwear. Her eyes were a little swollen with sleep, but when she saw me they got real wide. I can't forget how her face looked, like she already knew everything, and I thought her eyes were going to light me on fire.

"Where's Rowan? What happened Devyn?" She talked so fast and gripped my shoulders tight, trying to hold my shaking body still.

Her long white legs looked strangely vulnerable, and as I stood there sobbing I realized I had forgotten to put my pants back on. It was less awkward than in dreams, but I would've settled for awkward. Sloane ran every red light on the way to the police station as I told her what happened. The cops wouldn't take me back to the reservoir with them.

I had ridden a few blocks on my bike when I decided that my dress was too tight around my thighs. It was too hard to pedal. I set my bike against a tree and ripped my dress up the seams on both sides. Everyone could definitely see my Christmas underwear then. I smiled. I think Rowan would've liked that I wore them to his funeral. The back half of my dress hung down and flapped against my bike tire as I rode.

I'd never been to Sloane's art studio without Rowan before. Our high school was four blocks away, and we'd usually hang out there after school waiting for Sloane to give us a ride when she was done with work. She was always trying to get us to make something out of all that clay she had piled up in the back, and we were always pretty apathetic. A few months ago she finally flipped the sign on the door to "Closed," clapped her hands

together and said, "Alright kiddos, time to get off your asses and make some pottery!" I explained to her that my only exposure to art happened to be a particular phase of my childhood when I drew multitudes of pictures of balloon farms. Sloane had no sympathy. She took my hands and shaped them around the wet clay, then Rowan's hands, and she laughed as I created something that vaguely resembled a bowl, but really just looked more like what I would imagine a giant tumor would look like. I painted it orange. She set our lumpy pots carefully in the kiln and said she'd sell them the next day and make millions. She told me there was an illustrious future for me in the tumor-bowl industry.

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I locked my bike in a rack in the park a block away from Sloane's studio and ran the rest of the way. I pushed open the glass door and a bell rang, a real one, old and made of metal with chipped red paint. Sloane's so classy. She was sitting in the back room, like I'd thought she'd be, making something out of the wet, gray clay spinning on her pottery wheel. She was wearing a loose yellow tank top and baggy jeans, cuffed at the bottom and smeared with clay and paint. Her hair was up and lumpy, with the shortest wisps clinging to the sweat on the back of her neck. The kiln made the room so warm; it was unbearable in August. She still wore the lily.

When I walked in she shook her red bangs out of her face and looked up at me. I looked down at her hands, suddenly realizing that I hadn't planned out what to say. I guess I just thought it would come to me when I saw her, but I just stood there opening and shutting my mouth like a fish when it's dying. I didn't take my eyes off Sloane's long fingers shaping the clay. She didn't even have to look at it. It spun around and around real fast, fat and round and squishy, and my face got so damn hot. I thought maybe it was a stupid idea to come there.

"Devyn, what are you doing here?" Sloane asked me in a quiet voice, but not mean, just how you'd probably ask if you were an artist getting your art on and someone interrupted you mid-pot. She looked at my shredded dress, my red face. It was sweaty from the bike ride over and I could feel my dark hair plastered to my forehead. "What happened to you?" She had to keep

her hands on the clay.

“I...I...hi Sloane,” I answered and finally made myself make eye contact. Eye contact is the worst. I never know how much is enough or whether it’s okay to look from one eye to the other over and over and over. And Sloane has the pretty eyes, the kind that are white-blue with the dark blue around the edges, and it’s even worse with people who have pretty eyes. I always think they have to know how uncomfortable they’re making you with their unsettling eyes, like they can see you naked when you’re fully clothed. They have to know that the reason you’re staring at their eyes is only half because of eye contact, that the main reason is because you can’t not stare.

“What happened to you?” she repeated. “You’re looking a little rough.” She smiled at me, a polite, tired smile.

“It was too hard to pedal in my dress.”

“Oh,” she answered. Just “oh,” like nothing was wrong or ridiculous, my dirty torn dress, the nutcracker underwear, Rowan, and she glanced back down and admired her hands like they were part of the clay, like she was going to cook them in the kiln too, hard and perfect and permanent.

“He knew how to swim,” I whispered.

“What?”

“I said, he knew how to swim.”

Then she dropped her hands like they weren’t hers, like they couldn’t break, weren’t long and thin and glassy. The clay kept spinning. “It’s not your fault Devyn.”

“I mean, it doesn’t make any sense because he knew how to swim.”

“It’s not anybody’s fault.” Around and around and around. She looked like a statue, like some Greek pottery goddess sitting there so stiff.

“I was sleeping. I was just sleeping, Sloane.”

“It was an accident!” she yelled.

“He knew how to swim though. He knew how to swim...”

It was all I could offer.

“Jesus Devyn, stop saying that!” she was screaming now, standing up. She grabbed a clay bowl, deep purple, from a shelf full of pottery and threw it on the concrete floor. It shattered, and

the sharp edges were exposed and white.

“I fucking know he knew how to swim!” she screamed at me, leaning toward me a little, like how angsty teens scream in movies. The next one she smashed was a pot that Rowan had made, dark green and lumpy. Then my orange blob. Then a red vase, and she kept going and going, and I thought there must be something to it so I opened a bottle of glaze and thrashed it around until the bottle was empty, and glaze splattered the floor.

I was on my fourth bottle when Sloane crumpled down into the puddle of all the colors mixing up, in the middle of a shelf’s worth of pottery shards. She put both hands in her red hair, smearing it with wet clay, and the lily fell to the floor. She started crying. Maybe not crying. Maybe sobbing. Yeah, sobbing and shaking for air with her mouth open so wide like oxygen wasn’t quite doing it for her.

I just stood there not knowing what to do, and I thought I’d been doing a lot of that lately. But I mean, you think adults aren’t supposed to cry like that. When I was little I used to keep my blanket lying exactly like it was when I woke up in the morning because I knew it would change when I moved it and it would never be the same again. My parents laughed and said I was being weird, and I thought it was just a sad child thought, something to grow out of. At night I used to figure out the increasing percentage of life that I’d lived. I gave myself eighty years. At ten I was 12% done with life. At thirteen I was 16% done, and I was scared. I guess I always thought that’s what kids feel though, that when you grow up you would feel better, but Sloane was sobbing, and you don’t.

The abandoned clay on the electric pottery wheel had finally stopped spinning, but it was flattened and sharp now, and the air was squishing me again. I started crying. My throat constricted. It felt full of paint all dripping down, hardening into rock like I was looking at Medusa instead of Sloane there in a heap on the floor. I still didn’t know what to say to her to fix it even a little bit, but if I did I couldn’t have said it anyway. I was exhausted, and I let my shoulders drop—shoulders, back, hips, knees folded until I was down on the concrete too. I crawled over to Sloane, lied down next to her and put my head in her shud-

dering lap. I pinched my eyes shut so tight and stuffed my painty fingers in my ears because I just couldn't stand her sobbing like that. The glaze on the concrete soaked through my dress, wet and cool on my back. Eventually she stopped crying.

When I got home Mom didn't ask any questions. She helped me take off my dress. She wadded it up and threw it in the trash and washed the glaze from my hair.

I think tomorrow I'll throw my dirty underwear in Strawberry Reservoir.

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