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Opening Extract from...

Wilde Lake

Written by Laura Lippman

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WILDE LAKE

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In memory of Theo Lippman Jr., 1929–2014

WILDE LAKE

PART ONE

When my brother was eighteen, he broke his arm in an accident that ended in another young man's death. I wish I could tell you that we mourned the boy who died, but we did not. He was the one with murder in his heart and, sure enough, death found him that night. Funny how that works.

It happened at the lake. Wilde Lake. Named not for Oscar, but Frazar B. *Who?,* you may well ask. I had to look it up myself and I'm a native to these parts. Frazar Bullard Wilde was president of Connecticut General, an insurance company. When longtime customer Jim Rouse decided in the 1960s that he wanted to build a "new town" utopia in Maryland farmland midway between Baltimore and Washington, D.C. Connecticut General provided funding and agreed that Rouse should acquire the land stealthily, parcel by parcel, keeping prices low. Rouse was a good man—churchgoing, modest, indifferent to his personal fortune, careful with his company's coffers. Yet Columbia, Maryland, the egalitarian experiment that he probably considered his greatest legacy, began in deceit.

Again: Funny how that works.

Frazar's reward was the lake. The lake and, a year later, the "village" that surrounded it. Man-made, dammed, Wilde Lake was the opposite of wild, even with several hundred high school seniors massed at its southeastern edge, celebrating their graduation from Wilde Lake High School. It was June 18, 1980. They were eighteen years old, the lake was fourteen years old, Columbia was thirteen years old. The gathering went about as well as any unsupervised party of adolescents ever goes, and at least multiple family rec rooms would be spared the trash, the vomit, the blood. This outdoor party was a tradition, to the extent that this young, raw suburb could claim to have traditions. On graduation night, seniors stayed out until dawn. Where they ended up varied, but they always started at the lake.

When AJ informed our father that he intended to participate in this annual ritual, our father was torn. He never wanted AJ to be the odd kid out. Yet he truly hated the teenage tendency to *ramble,* as he called it, with no particular destination or plan. And there could be no escaping the fact that AJ was the son of Andrew Jackson Brant, state's attorney for Howard County. It would be big news if AJ Jr. were busted for smoking pot or underage drinking. It would not have ruined AJ's life, the way such missteps can today, what with mandatory expulsions from school and sentencing guidelines. County cops probably would have trained their flashlights on AJ and his friends, confiscated their contraband, ascertained that no one was getting behind the wheel drunk, then sent everyone home. A nuisance, an embarrassment, nothing more. Those were the limits of my father's imagination in June 1980, when it came to his only son.

But he was a fair man, always open to reasonable debate, encouraging us to make a case for the things we wanted—later bedtimes, the family car, a private phone extension. So AJ sat down with him a few days before graduation and told him—*told* him—that his crowd

planned to stay out all night, then crash at the home of his friend Bash, whose family had a renovated farmhouse in what was then considered "the country." Furthermore, AJ said, their friend Ariel, one of two girls in his group and by far the most sensible, had agreed to be the designated driver, although I don't think that was the term used. I'm not sure the term even existed back in 1980.

"I'm eighteen," AJ began in a stately manner, as if addressing a jury. "Born in 1962."

"I remember," our father said dryly. "I was there."

And I was there for this discussion, in our living room, pretending to read the evening newspaper, the *Light,* while listening to my father and brother talk. Eight years younger than AJ, I had a lot to learn about winning privileges. My high school graduation might be two entire presidential cycles away—elections were always a frame of reference in our political household—but I wanted to be prepared to argue for whatever would be the cool thing when my night finally came around.

"The law says I can drink beer and wine, but I'm going to be honest with you—my friends and I might drink other things if they're served. It seems only fair to me. If we lived in, say Wisconsin, I could drink whatever I liked at age eighteen."

"My job," our father said, "is to uphold the laws of *this* state."

"Are you going to forbid me to go?"

"No. You can go. And you can stay out. But I urge you to obey the laws, AJ. Whatever you do, I'm going to trust you to use common sense. You must understand that there will be no special treatment if you get in trouble."

"There never has been," AJ said.

Through no fault of his own, AJ ended up obeying the letter of the law. He spent most of the night in the ER at Howard County Hospital, where they did take his blood to test for alcohol and drugs,

come to think of it. PCP was a big concern at the time. They probably thought my brother had superhuman strength, given what he had done. But he had managed only a sip of beer before the trouble started.

The night had begun in the auditorium of Wilde Lake High School. With more than three hundred kids graduating, the seniors had been given only two tickets, a hardship for other households but not ours, with only our father and me. And I would have gladly given away my ticket, if I had been allowed. I fell asleep at least three times. The speaker began by informing the students that no one would remember who spoke at this graduation and I think he got that right. He joked that they were already celebrities—as freshmen, this future college Class of 1984 had been photographed for a cover story in *Life* magazine; AJ and his friends were front and center in the photo. Then there was that endless roll call of names, drawn out by parents who ignored the edict not to clap or cheer for individual students. AJ got the most applause, but not from my father or me, sticklers that we were for rules.

When it finally ended, we shook AJ's hand and went home with his folded cap and gown. AJ headed out with his gang, a mixed group in every sense of the word—boys and girls, white and black and Asian, theater geeks and jocks. AJ was the glue, the person who had brought them all together—a good athlete, a gifted singer and actor, an outstanding student. Davey and Bash were also big-deal athletes, with Davey exciting the interest of professional baseball scouts, although he was determined to get a college degree first. Lynne could have been an Olympic-caliber gymnast, but she was lazy, content to settle for being the star of the varsity cheerleading squad. Ariel and Noel got the juiciest parts in school plays. Not necessarily the leads, but the roles that allowed them to give the showiest, most memorable performances. AJ was going to Yale, our father's alma mater.

Davey had a scholarship to Stanford. Noel and Ariel were headed to Northwestern, Lynne was bound for Penn State, and Bash had surprised everyone by getting a National Merit scholarship, which he was using to attend Trinity University in San Antonio, where he had no intention of playing a sport. They had so much to celebrate. They popped the tops of their first beers, pleased with themselves, and toasted. "Life is a banquet," Ariel drawled, quoting a line from *Mame,* which had been the school musical. (She had been Agnes Gooch, not Mame, but she upstaged the leads.) "And most poor sons of bitches—"

It was then that the Flood brothers pulled into the parking lot.

"It happened so quickly," AJ would say whenever he had to tell the story. He had to tell it a lot that summer. He and his friends didn't perceive the Flood brothers as a threat, merely out of place in a throng of high school students. The Flood brothers had a reputation for scrapping, but they weren't scary. Only their dad was scary. They weren't that much older than the partying kids at Wilde Lake, and they didn't even look that different. They could have easily passed for members of the school's gentle stoner crowd, with their work boots and Levi's and blue denim shirts. But there was nothing gentle about the Floods, and neither one had known a graduation night. Every Flood boy, seven in all, had dropped out of school after turning sixteen.

These two, the youngest, got out of their beat-up old car, looked sneeringly at the high school students, then homed in on Davey, easy to find in any crowd—six feet five inches and one of the darkest black men I had ever seen in my life. Just that spring, he had played El Gallo in the all-county production of *The Fantasticks.* Beat AJ out for the part, which surprised some people, but not AJ, who was used to losing things to Davey by then. He said before tryouts that he knew Davey was the better, more original choice. There was an

air of mystery about Davey, a softness to his husky tenor that made you lean in, as if to hear a secret.

"There he is," one of the Floods said. Separated by only a year, they were almost impossible to tell apart. Tom and Ben. I remember being surprised to learn later that those names were not nicknames, shortened versions of Thomas and Benjamin. When Tom testified at his own trial later that year, that was the name he gave to the court. Tom Flood, just Tom, not even a middle name. They were the youngest of the seven Flood brothers. Maybe their parents didn't have the energy to come up with any more names, not for boys. The baby of the family, the only girl, had been given a much longer handle: Juanita Cordelia Flood. She should have been graduating from Wilde Lake tonight as well, but she had transferred midyear to Centennial.

"This is for Nita," one Flood said, sticking a knife into Davey's back. At first, AJ thought Davey had been punched. Davey barely flinched, just looked surprised and confused, swaying for a second before he fell to the ground. It was only then, as a dark liquid began to spread beneath him, staining his pale lavender polo shirt, that anyone understood what had happened. The Flood who had struck him—it must have been Ben, obviously it was Ben, but in that moment, in the dark, no one knew who was who, could barely register what was happening—raised the knife again. That was when AJ threw himself at him, caring not at all for his own safety. The two wrestled on the ground, and when the older boy—a man, really, already twenty—ran away, AJ gave chase. They disappeared into a dark fringe of trees near the lake's edge.

AJ's determined pursuit of the one Flood brother snapped Bash into action. He ran at the second one, screaming like a warrior. He brought him down with little difficulty. There would have been a lot of confusion now, much screaming, kids running in all directions,

yet most of them unaware of what had actually happened. The lake party was lots of little parties, each group keeping to itself. Some girls and boys would have gone off to make out privately. Others would be smoking or drinking in cars or hidden nooks. It's not a big lake. My family lived on the other side, close enough to keep a boat at the dock, if my father had been the kind of man who did things like keep a boat. And if my windows had been open, I might have heard the screams, then the sirens. But it was warm for June and we already had noisy window units rattling ineffectively in our old house.

Nineteen eighty. There was 911, but no cell phones. There was no pay phone near, or if there was, the kids were too rattled to remember its whereabouts. It was Noel who grabbed Ariel's car keys and drove over to the movie theater. He reasoned it would still be open, that someone there could make a call for him. In doing so, he probably did as much to save Davey's life as AJ did. But from the moment AJ emerged from the trees, panting and covered with blood, cradling his left arm, he received all the credit.

The headline in the next day's *Light* was: STATE'S ATTORNEY'S SON SAVES FRIEND'S LIFE IN BRUTAL REVENGE PLOT.

So my brother made news on graduation night, after all.

Credit the Floods points for patience: it had been almost seven months since their sister had claimed Davey had raped her. The story had fallen apart quickly, a vengeful tale told by a spiteful girl. Given that both were under eighteen, the accuser and the falsely accused, my father had tried to be discreet. "For both of their sakes," he said. But it was one thing to shield the facts from the newspapers, another to keep it from the mouths of gossipy teenagers.

Everyone soon learned that this sad, acne-scarred girl had tried to destroy Davey's life. Was AJ also an intended target that night? Tom, charged as an accomplice to attempted murder, insisted not. Ben didn't live long enough to say anything. When AJ tackled him in the woods a second time, his knife thrust upward into his heart. AJ, sobbing, led the EMTs to the body, but they couldn't save Ben Flood.

After a mistrial, Tom pleaded out to a lesser charge and served only four years. As for AJ—they called in a special prosecutor for the grand jury probe, at my father's insistence, and asked a state's attorney from an adjoining county to oversee it. As our father had told AJ, there would be no special treatment for the prosecutor's son. My brother was found to have acted in self-defense, and he left for Yale in September, happy for the anonymity that came with college, especially one where a movie star was in his class, a movie star who would be caught up in an attempted presidential assassination not even six months later. It was common then not to speak of traumatic things, to assume that a firm silence would lead to the fastest healing. So we never spoke about that night, and I assumed AJ's friends also let it go, to the extent that they could. It was harder for some than others. But to my knowledge, the subject never came up. Not with my father and AJ, not with AJ and his friends, and no one would discuss it with me at all. Most of what I know about that night is from reading old court documents and press accounts over the past few months.

I do remember that sometimes, on cold mornings, AJ would complain of pain at the elbow joint. "The frost is on the pumpkin, Lu," he would say to me, and his knobby elbow did look like a puny, discolored squash from certain angles. And if you knew where to

look, you could see that his left arm did not hang as straight as his right. He took up yoga, in part, to combat the pain and stiffness. But most people never noticed that, and over time, I forgot as well. But it was there, if you knew where to look. My brother's arm was crooked.