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# Lex Williford



Lex Williford's story collection, **Macauley's Thumb**, was co-winner of the 1993 Iowa Short Fiction Award. His stories have appeared in *American Literary Review*, *Shenandoah*, *Southern Review*, *Sou'wester*, *StoryQuarterly*, *Quarterly West*, *Kansas Quarterly*, *Laurel Review*, *Virginia Quarterly Review*, and elsewhere. He teaches fiction writing in the MFA Program at the University of Alabama.

White Rock 

*for Lily*

*in memory of Scott N.*

The night they made love the last time, then agreed to be friends, she lay on her back listening to his breath slowing in the dark, to the eaves dripping into the rain gutters, then to the cricket-song starting up outside her open window, felt the salt-wet cooling between her breasts and thighs, dripping from her eyes, then pooling into the whorls of her ears, till she felt she was underwater, diving.

Right before you, she whispered, I met another man.

His breathing stopped a moment and he touched her wrist on the damp sheets.

The lightning storm had passed over her house, wind gusts clattering acorns against her roof shingles, blowing her quilt to their feet through the billowing curtains and window screen, then blowing rain onto them both, naked in her bed. She stared up at the shadows of branches like river deltas crossing and wavering on the dark ceiling.

He was a professor at SMU, she whispered. A marine biologist. A little older than us, mid-forties, I think. Quiet and kind, like you.

She met him, she told him, one Saturday afternoon in late October this time two years ago, riding her Trek on the bike trails around White Rock Lake. She'd passed him sitting on the grass next to his touring bike leaning up against the levee to the old, abandoned fish hatchery, its windows broken out and boarded up, its red bricks scabbled with graffiti.

For some reason, she whispered, I stopped. Got off my bike.

She spread her quilt out under an oak sapling not far from him and ate the white grapes from the baggy in her hip pack, then unwrapped a chalky triangle of cheese and unscrewed the lid from a small black jar. She glanced at his ringless hand and the streak of gray at his temples as he stared out at the white sails on the water.

Want some crackers and cheese? she said.

He looked at her the first time, a little startled, then looked behind a moment, then turned back, seeing she was talking to him.

I don't know, he said.

It's water crackers and brie, she told him. Too fattening to eat alone. I've got a little Russian caviar, too. Not that I can afford it.

All right, he said, then sat next to her on the quilt she'd spread out on the grass.

Her mother'd made her the quilt, she told him, for her birthday this time last year. Her grandmother'd made quilts, too, but this had been her mother's first and only quilt and it'd taken her nine months to sew. He nodded, listening, as she spread soft yellow cheese and black roe onto crackers for each of them, then talked awhile about her mother and father, who'd had her unexpectedly in their forties and both died unexpectedly in their eighties, just a month apart, a few months before.

My mother died a week before my fortieth birthday, she told him. It was a week before I turned my mother's age the year she gave birth to me in Baylor Hospital. I was a surprise, she said. My parents'd tried for years and given up on having kids. *It* was a surprise, she said, my mother's death, my father's.

She took a bite of the dry white cracker, chewing, the warm brie buttery on her tongue. The breeze off the lake was cool and the sun warmed her dark hair at the nape of her neck. A red-wing blackbird warbled a lifeguard's whistle, fluttering its wings in the cattails.

When I was a girl, she said, I used to hate caviar. Too salty. Too fishy. Too yucky. Once, my father had a jar of salmon eggs from when he'd gone fishing in Colorado. I thought they were red hots and ate one. I was just three or four at the time. Maybe that's why it's taken me so long to come around. My parents weren't exactly rich—my father sold sporting goods at Sears—but he bought my mother caviar like roses, she loved it so much. She'd eat caviar on crackers and drink champagne and claim to come from Russian royalty. She'd soak in a hot tub and scatter in handfuls of bath oil beads. Then she'd sneak off with my father to their bedroom for hours.

It's strange, she said. Before my mother died, I never cared much for caviar, but now I crave it like chocolate.

Her face flushed from her flood of words—too much time too long alone—and she shooed away a bluebottle fly that had landed on the lip of the jar, then screwed the lid back on. She shook her head. God, I hope I'm not talking too much. I don't know why I'm telling you all this.

He stared down at his open palms, and she waited for him to make an excuse to leave.

My parents are gone, too, he said. Gone a long time back, actually. He smiled. My father used to bring my mother out here. To watch the submarine races.

She glanced at him and his eyes held hers.

You know, he said, to make love. All this was way out in the country then, right after the war. Hard to believe that now. Everybody was doing it then, my father used to say. They just didn't talk about it so much. He stared out at a Sunfish leaning out from the wind as it tacked, a man and woman leaning back together at the gunnels to keep the boat from tipping.

I used to bring my girlfriend out here, too, in my parents' station wagon. Long before they died. Long before she and I ever got engaged, then broke it off. We were in high school then. Lake Highlands. Late sixties, early seventies. She got pregnant and wanted the baby. I asked her to marry me, then changed my mind and had to borrow money from my parents to pay for the abortion. Took me two years to pay them back and she never talked to me again after that. Moved off to Galveston to finish her senior year, then married a shrimper. Had five kids, last I heard. Hard to believe, but our own kid would've been in her twenties.

A grasshopper buzzed out in an arc as he pulled up a long seed-head of Johnson grass at the edge of the quilt. He chewed awhile at the lime end, staring out at the glittering gray water.

One winter, he said, right after she and I met, I drove my girlfriend out here and put down the back seats. It was raining outside and cold, so we kept on our coats. Then just as we were, you know . . . there was this flashlight through the fogged windows and we were fumbling for our jeans. The cop rapped on the back window and shouted, You kids take that somewhere else. So we did.

He looked back over his shoulder, then nodded up the levee's green slope to the fish hatchery. My friends used to take their girlfriends inside that place, he said. To scare them. Broke out windows and took the girls down into the old spawning tanks, then turned off their flashlights. I could never bring myself to do it. My girlfriend was so fragile. It's what drew her to me, I guess. He chewed on the grass and looked at her a long time without blinking, till she had to look away, then down at an acorn that had fallen between her bare feet on the quilt's bright-checked pattern.

When the cop drove off, he said, I pulled my parent's station wagon up the slope and around back, there, under that big live oak, behind the hatchery. My girlfriend followed me in the rain through a broken window. All we had was an old army blanket over our heads and my father's big flashlight.

He shook his head. All this was twenty-five years ago. Hard to believe. But if you and I went inside there right now, it probably wouldn't be any different.

She smiled. Thanks, she said, but no thanks.

He laughed and tossed the seed-head back over his shoulder. Nothing inside there, he said, but echoes and deep tanks and rusted pipes down to the water. He nodded to the ends of the pipes welded shut at the chipped concrete quay along the muddy shore, rust bleeding from the cracks, the exposed rebar. A white-haired black man had three cane poles leaning out against the railing, their lines taut to their lead weights on the muddy bottom.

My father took me out here once when they let open the gates, he said. I was three or four at the time. Thousands and thousands of bass and catfish fingerlings pouring out the pipes like liquid silver. It set something off in me, I can't explain it. A year later, I wanted to see it all again, but the Corps of Engineers had shut it all down, I'm not sure why.

My girlfriend went down the ladder first while I pointed the flashlight for her. She held out her hands when she got to the bottom of the tank. Her palms were covered in rust, I remember. I tossed her down the flashlight and the blanket, then stepped down the ladder to the bottom, while she held the light on me. Then we spread the blanket out there and made love for the first time till the flashlight went dead. We weren't afraid, though. We just stayed there in the dark and spent the whole night, our first together, listening to the echoes of the rain and the waves coming up from the shore through the hollow pipes. Talking about the life we'd make together.

I've gone on midnight dives off oil wells along the gulf coast, he said, dived off the Keys and the Great Barrier Reef, but I've never experienced anything like it. Sounds strange, I know, but I don't think I've ever been so happy.

He shook his head. Now, here I am telling you all this, and I don't even know your name.

I'm the one who started it, she said.

Nodding, he stared out to a dredge-barge anchored on the far side of the lake, its shovel scooping up tons of dripping black mud. He was quiet a long time.

Like all lakes, he told her, this one's filling up with sediment. In most places now it's only about three or four feet deep. Used to be thirty or forty in places.

He picked up the jar of caviar and peeled the label back at the corner.

The Black Sea's dying, you know, he said. Russian royalty used to go there for centuries for its curing waters. But now it's going anoxic. Oxygen starved. Too many nutrients. Thousands and thousands of tons of fertilizers and pesticides and human and animal waste all flowing a thousand miles from the Danube. Mackerel and sturgeon populations crashing. Overfishing. Big floating mats of algae and bacteria blocking out the sun to the bottom. Dead water rising up, choking everything off.

He put the jar back down on the quilt.

Ten years, twenty max, he said, and no more Black Sea sturgeons. No more caviar. No more.

He took a bite of cracker.

Everything's so fragile, he said, shaking his head. Then he smiled at her and laughed. God, this is all so cheerful, I'm sorry.

He watched a single oak leaf drift down to her quilt, then glanced out at the bright leaves floating along the muddy shore, the reflection of the bare branches in the water, a scattering of acorns splashing the water in the wind. Then he stared out awhile at the whitecaps on the choppy water.

It's funny, he said. Last week, I was picking out a salmon steak on ice in Safeway and I saw this man leaning over his shopping cart and kissing his kid on the ear. It set something off in me, I can't explain it. Something turned over inside me and I had this ache and I had to lean against the glass case just to get my breath. I've heard of women having this need, this longing, this almost physical ache for a child. But never in a man, never in me. Not until now. I don't know how to explain it.

She'd been quiet a long time, holding her arms against the chill of

sunset, and she'd not known what to say.

I've felt that ache, too, sometimes, she'd wanted to tell him, then, looking at him, feeling it then in that moment. But she'd said nothing.

His neck and jaws had flushed a deep pink, the color of the leaves under the water and the mackerel sky out over the Dallas skyline, the single, full-bellied cloud drifting out over the lake.

He laughed and shook his head.

Now I'm the one who's talking too much, he'd told her. I don't know why I'm telling you all this.

# #



The light hairs along her forearms and thighs had goose-pimpled in the cool damp air, and she sat up in her bed to shut her window, muffling the cricketsong outside, the slow dripping of the eaves. She pulled the quilt up from their feet to cover herself, and him, sure he'd fallen to sleep, no point in finishing her story. Then just as she reached across to lay the quilt over him, he held her face in his hands and kissed her, then said, You're cold, and turned her over to her side away from him under the quilt, spooning into her back, warming her, crossing his arms around her shoulders, then cupping her breasts in his warm palms.

This quilt, he whispered into her hair, kissing her ear, this is the quilt your mother made.

She nodded in the dark.

I've seen the grass stains, he said, but I didn't know. You never told me. Never told me about your marine biologist. He touched her hair

at her temple and smoothed it back behind her ear. You and he, he whispered, you must've made love on this quilt, in the grass, in this bed, like us. She turned to face him, but he held her there and said, No, no, it's all right. I'm sorry. I shouldn't've said that. It's none of my business.

No, she said, you don't understand. He and I never talked much after that. We just met once more time to ride our bikes around the lake. That was it. That was all. And then I met you.

Well, he whispered, it doesn't matter now, does it? Maybe it's best this way. You can go back to him now.

No, she said, facing him. No.

Look, he whispered, his breath warm on her face, I've tried to be honest with you. I like my life like it is. And I like my life with you in it. But I don't want anyone else but you. By the time I turn sixty-five, I don't want to be worrying about a kid just turning twenty. I'm too old now and I don't have that kind of energy. Sometimes people just want different things. There's nothing wrong with that. If you want more, it's all right. I understand. I told you that. I told you.

No, she said. No. That's not what I'm talking about.

What, then? he said. What are you talking about?

She lay on her back again, quiet a long time, staring up at the branches fissuring on the dark ceiling. Headlights flashed across the room as a car turned the street corner outside, its tires hissing on the wet pavement.

The first time you and I went out, she whispered, the first time you rang my door bell to pick me up the first time, the telephone rang. Almost in the same moment. It was him. He said he wanted to talk. Nothing important, he said. He knew it was late notice, but could we maybe get together for some coffee?

My date's at the door, I told him, then was angry at myself for blurting it out like that. I've made other plans. Can I call you tomorrow?

Sure, he said, no problem, and he hung up the phone.

I didn't think anything about it, but when I called him the next day he didn't answer, and his answering machine was turned off. I called him again a few more times the next week and then again that weekend. A woman answered the phone. I didn't know if I should say anything and started to hang up. Then I asked her if he was there. The woman didn't say anything for a long time. Then she told me he was dead.

What? I said. What happened? Who is this?

I thought the woman'd hung up for a moment. Then she said she was his sister and she'd been the one to find him, in his bathtub. He'd slipped under the water and she'd found him that way. He'd struggled for years with depression, she said, but it was still a surprise. His work made him sad.

Everything made him sad. He worried too much about things.

I didn't know what to tell her. I didn't even ask her about the funeral. I just said I was sorry and hung up the phone. What else could I say?

She lay there in her bed, imagining him drawing himself a hot bath, swallowing handfuls of round black pills with champagne, setting the empty bottles at the edge of the cold ceramic tub and lying back, staring up at the plaster cracks on his bathroom ceiling, slipping into sleep under the warm water, covering his mouth, his nose, his closed eyes.

An acorn popped against the roof and rolled into the rain gutter, and she felt something turn over inside her, an ache so strong she pressed his palms between her breasts just to get her breath.

He wiped her eyes with the heel of his palm, then held her.

Why? he asked her. Why didn't you tell me all this before?

I don't know, she said.

Then she felt herself slipping into sleep, heard for the first time the

single cricket under her bed, its bright, trilling whistle.

**THE END**

Lex Williford: Fiction  
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