

THE GOLF COURSE LIES on what most people already consider the wrong side of the river. For a while an armed robber worked the 16th tee. Play dwindled down to almost nothing. The Regulars began packing handguns in their golf bags. They are the best-armed golfers in America.

A pair of red-tailed hawks nests in a maple tree in the woods on the side of the ridge between number six and number seven. These are the woods in which the feral dogs live. The dogs—10, 12, who knows how many—are, amazingly, all black, lab mixes dropped off in the park.

Bill, the new pro, worries that the dogs are going to bite somebody. He worries that nobody will ever want to play golf on the wrong side of the river. He worries about selling beer to men with handguns. The golf course is the oldest in Nashville, its design classic, but Metro refuses to spend a dime on the greens. “What do you mean, you can’t find them?” he yells into the phone. “How can you not find a dozen black dogs?”

The hawks glide overhead in slow circles, their screeching more at home on a movie soundtrack than here, a golf course surrounded by suburbs, Little Hollywood, Lockeland Springs, Inglewood, the tightly-packed neighborhoods where the Regulars grew up before they moved off and their parents died and were buried in the city cemeteries after funerals in their failing churches and this part of the world became the wrong side of the river. The regulars don’t live here anymore, just drive back to play golf. A slow song about

Mama would make most of them cry.

“I can remember when most of Inglewood was farmland,” Mackie says. “Shoot, Mackie,”

says Jonesie, the high

lonesome plumber—that’s what his business card says, Arlon Jones, the high lonesome plumber—“I bet you can remember the flood.”

“What flood is that?” Mackie asks, because he can remember several, before they built the dams at Percy Priest and Old Hickory, the Cumberland, brown and roiling, coming up out of its banks.

“Noah’s flood,” says Jonesie.

Somebody snickers.

“That ain’t funny,” Mackie says. Mackie is 77; his wife has artificial hips. He has no idea how they got to be so old.

The Regulars hold their breath a moment, then shout with laughter, shout for Mark behind the counter to bring them more beer. Mark has a writing deal with EMI, but hasn’t had a song recorded yet. “Come over here and get it,” Mark says. “I gotta keep the tab straight.” Mark has been here three months and knows better than to distribute beer to the Regulars without keeping the tab straight. He is watching music videos on CMT, thinking of how much money he would make if Faith Hill cut one of his songs.

Jonesie’s surname is Jones; Mackie’s is McIntyre. Baldie is bald and Fatty is fat. The bigger of the two hawks is Big Hawk and the smaller one is Mama Hawk. Tumorhead, the squirrel, has a tumor on its head. It appears outside on the bag rail. Jonesie buys a bag of peanuts and leaves the clubhouse. The squirrel will eat



The Regulars

A short story by TONY EARLEY

out of his hand, but nobody else’s, a fact that makes him feel better than just about anything he knows, although he has never said this out loud to anyone, and never will.

Bill is afraid the squirrel is going to bite Jonesie and has

asked him not to feed it on the bag rail. He goes into his office and closes the door. The black dogs, 11 of them today, trot single file across the number nine fairway and disappear into the woods. A fungus is killing the greens. The greens at Harpeth Hills are perfect, but Harpeth Hills is in Belle Meade. Sometimes Bill hates golf. He is getting his MBA nights, through the program at Belmont.

Mackie follows Jonesie outside. Tumorhead inches toward the peanut Jonesie offers. Only Jonesie knows that the squirrel is blind in one eye. “Hello, Darlin’,” he croons in his high, sweet voice. “Nice to see you.”

“How do you know that’s a girl squirrel? How do you know you ain’t feeding nuts and singing love songs to a boy squirrel?”

“Cause Tumorhead loves me, that’s how. All the ladies love old Jonesie.”

Mackie shades his eyes, watches Big Hawk wheel above 13 and 14. Tumorhead twitches, cocks his head to one side, takes the peanut from Jonesie, sits up, holds it in its shriveled, old man’s hands, chews busily with its sharp, rodent teeth. The squirrel won’t let Mackie get anywhere near it. Mackie wonders if Big Hawk can see the squirrel from so far away, feels his face flush for no reason he can think of.

“Big Hawk’s gonna eat that squirrel,” he says.

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Jonesie looks up quickly. "What did you say?"

Jonesie, like a lot of small men Mackie has known, has a bad temper. Mackie swallows. "You heard me," he says. "Big Hawk's gonna eat Tumorhead, and there ain't a damn thing you can do about it."

Jonesie straightens up. "Let me tell you something," he says. "If I ever catch that damn hawk sitting on the ground, I'll kill it dead-er'n hell."

Mackie feels like he has climbed to the top of a tall tree, feels the great, dizzy height swaying with his weight. "And let me tell you something. If you shoot Big Hawk or Mama Hawk, I'll shoot *you*."

Jonesie blinks twice. He steps close to Mackie. The top of his head comes up only as far as Mackie's chin. This doesn't make Mackie feel better, although once it would have.

"You'll shoot *me*, old man, is that what you said? You're gonna shoot *me*?"

The door to the clubhouse swings open and Bill and Mark rush out, followed by the Regulars, by Fatty and Baldie and Mule and Newtsie and Stretch and Big Squarehead and Little Squarehead. "Hey, hey, hey," Bill says. "What's going on here?"

"Mackie here's got some kind of death wish," Jonesie says. "That's what's going on here."

"Well, it's over," Bill says. "It's done. You can take it to Harpeth Hills if you want to, but I'm not gonna have it here."

"He's messing with the wrong plumber," Jonesie says. "Where I come from, we shoot each other."

"Well, it's over," Bill says. "You hear me? Nobody's gonna shoot nobody. I'll ban you both right now if I have to."

"It's over," Mackie says, backing away, nodding, raising his hands. "It's all over. Everything's over." He turns, starts toward the golf cart which still holds his clubs, feels himself stagger once from turning too quickly, an old man's stumbling step. He gets into the cart, drives off, everybody watching, toward the number 10 tee, down the fairway, out of sight, even though he's already played 18 holes and doesn't know if he has enough money left on him to pay the cart fee for another nine.

The Regulars watch Mackie drive off, watch him disappear into the ravine, reappear on

the other side, and drive up the hill toward the green.

"Where's he going?" Little Squarehead asks.

"He's getting away," Fatty says, hoping that he has made a joke.

"Who the hell cares?" asks Jonesie. He looks around for Tumorhead, who has vanished in the commotion.

Mackie stops the cart behind the green on number 10, stares at the pond on number 11, the green above the pond, its grass dying, the Spanish-style bungalows of Little Hollywood across the street beyond the green. He isn't sure where he wants to go, wants to go anywhere other than back to the clubhouse, anywhere other than home, where his wife has become an old woman he hardly recognizes, tottering around on a walker, and who knows how she looks at him?

The Regulars file back into the clubhouse, shuffle to the tables, shake beer cans to see how full they are. Nobody can think of anything to say. They have almost witnessed a fight. Nobody looks at Jonesie. Big Squarehead says, "Which one of you numbnuts stole my beer?"

"Hey Mark," Jonesie calls. "Let's go outside."

"Where we going?"

"Nowhere," Jonesie says. "Outside. C'mon."

Mark follows Jonesie into the parking lot, where Jonesie points at his truck. "Get in," he says.

"Where we going?"

"Nowhere. Just get in." Mark climbs in, but leaves the door open. Jonesie reaches into the glove compartment, pulls out a cassette, sticks it into the player. "Listen to this new tape I made," he says.

Mackie searches the sky for Big Hawk or Mama Hawk, but cannot find them. Often he sees crows harrying the hawks, flying above them, forcing them down onto the ground, where they sit, bigger than you would ever imagine birds could be, the golfers stopping their carts to stare, until the crows fly away. Mackie hates crows. One day he saw three crows walking like morticians across the fairway on 15, toward the small, swampy patch of trees near the tee box, while a mockingbird rasped and squawked and dived at them. He could tell they were up to no good and chased them away with his cart. Mackie stares at the pond. "Where I come from," he says softly, "we shoot each other."

In the truck, Mark listens to Jonesie sing "Mother's not dead, she's only a-sleeping," the old Bill Monroe song, and thinks boom box. He recorded it at home on a boom box.

Mackie knows where Jonesie comes from. Jonesie grew up on Ordway, less than a half mile away from the golf course. The first time Mackie laid eyes on him, Jonesie had run out of the woods bordering number 11 and, with a long stick, whacked into the pond the golf ball Mackie had just knocked onto the green. Jonesie was only five, maybe six, at the time. Mackie was already married, a father, his babies still babies and still safe at home. Mackie imagines Jonesie crouching in the woods, waiting for a golf ball to land close by, and shivers as a great sadness passes over him. The boy had only wanted to play golf. He taps the fingers on one hand several times with his thumb and says out loud, "Fifty-one years ago. Jesus. Lord Jesus, save us all."

Jonesie punches a button and ejects the cassette. He puts the cassette into the case, puts the case back into the glove compartment. "I just thought," he says, "since you had a record deal ..."

"Dude, I work at a golf course. That ought to tell you about my position in the industry right there."

"Listen," Jonesie says. "Forget I said anything. Johnny ain't much older than I am, and they won't play his songs on the radio." He fishes in his shirt pocket for a cigarette. "You know that squirrel? Tumorhead? It can only see out of one eye. That's why I feed it."

Mark nods, lost. He tries to pinch shut the song lyric he hears opening inside his head, the one about a divorced guy feeding a one-eyed squirrel and singing a Bill Monroe song into a boom box in a little house near the airport.

Little Squarehead cups his hand against the front window and says, to no one in particular, "Whattaya think they're talking about?"

"They're in love," says Fatty.

"Please don't say that to Jonesie when they come back in here," Bill says. "Go say that at Harpeth Hills or somewhere, but don't say it here."

"I still can't believe," says Big Squarehead, "that one of you sonsabitches drunk my beer."

Bill has a quiz tonight, and still hasn't cracked a book. He decides to take a cart and look for Mackie as soon as Mark comes back inside.

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