

HOUSEWARMING

by Kevin Wilson

Mackie's son needed help with the deer. "It's in our pond," Jackson said to his father, "and we've got a housewarming party tomorrow afternoon and this damn deer is in our pond. It's dead, by the way. I don't remember if I told you that."

"I assumed that," Mackie said. "This is the first I've heard of a housewarming."

"It's just some people from work," his son said without pausing, "It's no one you would want to be around."

"How did it die?" he asked.

"Well, it drowned, I guess. It's floating in our pond. I don't know what else to tell you."

"You want me to come up there?" Mackie asked.

"Why do you think I'm calling?" his son replied, and both of them hung up the phone without saying another word.

Jackson was throwing rocks at the deer, which was floating about ten or fifteen feet from the shore, its swollen belly rising above the surface of the water, a small island.

Mackie had driven the route from his own house to Jackson's cabin over a dozen times in the last month. Since Jackson and his wife, Cindy, had bought the house in November, Mackie had been coming by to help renovate, make it livable.

Two weeks after closing, his son called during his break at the factory, and told him, "Cindy says we should put new tile in the kitchen before we move in, since we're doing all these other projects at the same time." Mackie showed up at the empty cabin, Cindy was staying with her sister until the repairs were finished, and found the boxes of tile waiting in the kitchen, the old linoleum pulled up and curled in the corner of the room. He started mixing mortar, snapped on his kneepads, and got started. The house smelled of new paint and wood chips, and Mackie wished he'd brought a mask for his face. When his son got off of work, his truck winding down the long driveway, headlights flickering through the trees, Mackie was cutting tile with a wet saw he'd brought from his own house. With each cut, the water shot into his face like sparks, his eyebrows dripping wet. "We're making good progress," Jackson said, peering inside the house at the kitchen floor.

"We are," Mackie replied, drying the reformed tile with a towel, touching the new shape along the smooth edges.

Mackie's knees ached from the constant kneeling, fitting the tile into place. His son was standing over him, his pockets filled with foam dividers to place between the tiles. It was good to work together, Mackie feeling his son's eyes on his hands, learning how to make things work. Another piece had to be cut and he did not want to stand again, to walk to the front porch and lean against the saw. "Jackson," he said, "hand me a tile." Jackson walked gingerly to the box and brought one back. Mackie took out his red pencil and marked off the section, handing the tile back to his son. "Make that cut," he said. Jackson went outside and Mackie listened to the whine of the saw as it started, the sound



of metal touching ceramic, and then he heard his son shouting, “Goddamn it all.” Mackie shot up, immediately blaming himself for not doing it to begin with. He was already hoping for the best of the worst, just a finger, not his thumb.

“Motherfucking, son of a bitch,” his son was screaming, down on one knee, facing away from Mackie. The wet saw was turned over, the dull gray water pooling around it. When Mackie knelt by his son, Jackson stood up and pushed past his father, back into the house. Mackie looked around for a digit, blood, but he didn’t see anything. He ran back to the house and found Jackson in the bathroom, water running, examining his face. “A goddamned piece of tile popped up and hit me in the face.” Mackie looked at his son’s reflection in the mirror; a small cut was bubbling blood just under his right eye. “I could’ve been blinded,” Jackson said, staring angrily at Mackie. “Don’t we have any son of a bitching goggles?” Mackie shook his head. Jackson turned off the water, took out his handkerchief and pressed it against the cut. “Well I’m driving to the Wal-Mart to get some then.” His son was out of the house, into his truck, and pulling out of the driveway, while Mackie stood on the porch, lifting the wet saw upright. He worked until midnight, waiting for Jackson to return, and finally gave up. He rolled out his sleeping bag and slept in his clothes, waiting for morning, listening to the house settle around him.

The next day, Jackson showed up with a bandage covering the wound, a pair of goggles resting on top of his head. “Got to be safe,” he said. “We can’t get hurt anymore.” Mackie nodded and they worked into the evening, finishing the job.

When he got to the house, Cindy was waiting on the porch. “He’s waiting for you,” she said. “It’s awful, that deer. You can see it from the house, just floating in the water. Its eyes are open.” She hugged him and then pointed towards the trail, which lead down to the pond. “Don’t let him get too angry,” she said. “He takes everything so personally. This isn’t his fault, of course.” Mackie nodded. “I know,” he said.

Jackson was throwing rocks at the deer, which was floating about ten or fifteen feet from the shore, its swollen belly rising above the surface of the water, a small island. Mackie stood and watched his son for a few seconds without making his presence known. His son had surprisingly good aim, the rocks cutting through the cold air and thumping against the belly of the deer. “Fucking deer,” his son said to no one. Mackie wondered if Jackson was trying to sink the deer, trying to get it fully underwater and hidden. He stepped out from the trees and waved to his son. Jackson nodded, then threw another rock. “This isn’t going to be pleasant,” Jackson said. “I know,” Mackie responded.

Jackson had come back to Tennessee last year, to stay, Mackie hoped. After high school, Jackson had left to work as a mechanic in Hunstville, and then moved around the southeast for the next eight years, never staying long in any one place, Mackie’s letters to him bouncing back with no known forwarding address. He would wait until Jackson’s next phone call, locating his son for the time being. Sometimes he would get calls from prison, Jackson asking his father to post bail and Mackie would be in the car, driving for hours to Louisville or Mobile or Daytona Beach to retrieve his son. This particular time, Jackson had shot out the tires of his neighbor’s car. “He’d cut me off a few days before,” Jackson had told his father on the drive back from the police station. “Cut me off and nearly made me slam into him. I yelled at him and the son of a bitch smiled. Smiled.”

Mackie could feel his son's anger vibrate within the car, as if the event was happening all over again. "Well," Mackie said, "he probably don't remember that." Jackson smiled, his face white from an oncoming car's headlights. "I know that," he said. "That's why I shot his tires. To remind him."

"We need a boat," Jackson said. Mackie agreed with him, but they didn't have a boat. He walked toward the edge of the woods and dragged a fairly long branch back to the shore, something to work with, a tool. He sat down on the ground, which was wet from the melting frost, and took off his shoes and socks, rolling up his pant legs. Jackson was still staring out at the deer, as if waiting for it to show signs of life, to swim to the shore and jump into the woods. "Okay," said Mackie, but Jackson still didn't move. "Okay," he said again, "here's what we'll do." Jackson turned and saw Mackie, barefooted. "Good lord, dad, it's thirty degrees out here."

"We have to get in there, Jackson. We have to wade out there and get that deer. Then we'll take it somewhere else. Hell, we'll just toss it on the side of the road if it comes to that, but we need to get it out of your pond. That's why you called me."

Jackson looked at Mackie's feet again, then back at the deer. "Maybe we should call animal services or something," he offered. "It might be diseased. We should get an expert out here."

"Son, they're not going to come on a weekend. This housewarming you're having for your friends? It's tomorrow. If you don't want them to see this deer in your pond, we're going to just get in the water and fish it out. Now take your shoes off, so they don't get wet."

Jackson kicked at the ground. "Let me hear the rest of the plan first."

"It's pretty simple. We'll wade into the pond, and I'll take this stick and move away from you. Then I'll direct the deer towards the shore and you get a hold of it and then you drag it in. Then we'll both pull it onto land and get rid of it."

"Maybe I should be the one with the stick," Jackson said.

"Son," Mackie said quickly, a flash of irritation striking his voice, "just take off your shoes and let's go get the damn deer."

Jackson had last been in Raleigh, painting houses or working at a guitar store. Mackie had received a postcard. *Got a job and a girl*, it read, *and my probation for the dog thing is done*. A few weeks later, his son called. Mackie had been slightly shocked to hear his son's voice, "Hey, Dad," without the usual mechanized voice intoning the particular jail where he'd been locked up which usually opened any phone call he received from Jackson. "You okay, son?" Mackie asked. "Better than okay," Jackson answered. "Much better than that." Mackie was glad to hear it, but he still would not allow himself to believe it was true.

"Amy's pregnant," Jackson said.

"Who?" Mackie asked, worried again.

"Amy. The girl I told you about in the postcard," Jackson said, his voice rising. "She's pregnant. We're going to have a baby."

"Did you marry her? Are you already married?"

"You don't have to be married to have a baby," Jackson answered, the connection fading and then coming back.



"I know that," Mackie said, feeling stupid for having asked, complicating things. "I just wanted to know if I'd missed anything. Congratulations."

"If it's a girl, we're going to name it Carla, after mom."

"That's a nice name," Mackie said, remembering his wife. His son was just a boy when she died, and it made him happy to hear that he still thought of her. "What about a boy?"

"Jackson Junior," Jackson said, "Jackson Junior for sure."

Mackie asked to speak to Jackson's girlfriend, but she was taking a nap. "I'll wake her," Jackson said, and before Mackie could stop him, the phone was set down and there was silence, humming. Less than a minute later, a voice, barely a whisper, a sore throat, answered. "Jackson said you wanted to speak with me?"

"I just wanted to say hello and to tell you congratulations."

"Thank you," the woman said, her voice still quiet. When she didn't offer anything, Mackie continued, "And I want you to call me if you need anything. If you need anything at all, you give me a call, okay?"

"I'll do that," she said, and then hung up.

It wasn't working. The branch he'd found, substantial enough to steer the animal towards Jackson, was too heavy and Mackie couldn't control it, the water up to his armpits, the shock of the cold taking away every other breath. Jackson was shivering, waist deep in the water. "I'm gonna have to get out of the water soon," he shouted, and Mackie understood that he hadn't planned this well. He felt the situation falling out of his control, into a place where Jackson's anger would surface and take over. Mackie tossed the stick into the water and began swimming towards the deer, kicking his legs under the water, his clothes weighing him down. "I'm going to push it towards you," he shouted to his son over the sound of the water splashing around him. "Wade out a little further and grab it." He finally reached the deer and touched its fur, which was unexpectedly colder than the water. It was heavy, but he'd anticipated the weight of this dead animal. The bad things he'd carried in his life had always been just as heavy as he'd expected, always measuring up to his worst expectations.

"Keep swimming," his son instructed. "Just swim a little further to me and we'll be done. C'mon, Dad."

Jackson's girlfriend called Mackie three weeks later, at two in the morning. When Mackie answered, he immediately said, "Jackson?" anticipating another phone call from jail, another thing to fix. "It's Amy," the soft voice replied. "Jackson's girlfriend?" she offered helpfully. "What's wrong?" Mackie asked. "I lost it," she said, crying. "I lost the baby."

"Oh god," Mackie said. "I'm sorry, honey."

"And Jackson," she continued, "he thinks I did it on purpose. He says I did something wrong. He keeps hitting me."

Mackie sat up in bed, felt his neck stiffen and jerk to the left, a tic he'd had since childhood, as if the danger was just over his left shoulder. "He hit you?" he asked, to be certain.

"He hits me," she answered.

"Put him on the phone."



“He won’t talk to you. He doesn’t want to talk to anybody.”

“Amy, you need to go to a motel, or go to a friends house. We’ll figure this out, but you cannot have him hitting you. That’s got to stop.”

“I don’t want to call the police, but I might have to.”

“Amy, call them if you need to. Let me think and I’ll call you back.”

“I don’t want him here anymore,” she said. “I don’t love him now.”

Mackie hung up the phone and was already out of bed, putting on his clothes, grabbing his keys off the dresser. Before he knew it, he was in the car, on the interstate, going to see his son.

“I’ve got it,” his son announced, the weight of the dead animal shifting from father to son. He watched Jackson tug the deer by its legs towards the shore, a tiny wake trailing behind it. He watched the white tail of the deer and then saw a jerk in the movement, a hesitation and then there was a splash. Jackson was under the water, flailing, the deer spinning just slightly, and Mackie waded through the water to reach his son.

Jackson was thrashing around in the water, his feet and arms surfacing and then submerging, splashing water everywhere. When he realized how shallow it was, he stood up again, soaking wet, the leg of the deer in his hand. “The fucking leg fell off,” he screamed. “You told me to just drag it in,” he said, staring at Mackie, “but it’s decayed.”

“Let’s get it to the shore,” Mackie said. “Then we can get angry at each other.” Jackson stared at his father a little longer and then turned and threw the detached leg onto the shore.

“I’m grabbing the antlers this time,” Jackson said. “Pull his damn head off.” Mackie pushed the hind end of the deer towards the shore. “Let’s just get it out of here,” he whispered.

Eight hours and he was in North Carolina, staring at his son’s house, the car idling on the street in front. He saw his son look through a window and then quickly close the blinds. A few seconds later, Amy looked out the window, shaking her head. Mackie thought about what he would say to his son, how he could fix the situation. He felt foolish for driving this far without having a plan, some way to help. His son was now coming down the steps of the porch, pointing at him. Mackie still couldn’t think of anything to say. He got out of the car.

“Go home, Dad,” Jackson said. “I’m sorry Amy called you and that you had to drive all this way, but go home.”

“Could I talk to Amy?” he asked. He could see her in the window, but her hand was shading her eyes.

“Go home, Dad. Please go home.”

“Did you hit her, Jackson?”

“She lost the baby, Dad.”

“Did you hit her?”

“Please go home.”

Mackie punched his son in the mouth and then placed his intertwined fingers behind his son’s head, pushing Jackson’s face into his own knee. Jackson fell to the street, and Mackie was already pulling him into the car, placing his body across the back seat. His



son was unconscious, his mouth bleeding, and Mackie slammed the door and walked up to the house. He knocked on the door and Amy opened it.

"I need some rope," Mackie said.

"He really did hit me," Amy said. Her throat showed pale purple fingerprints where he had grabbed her, and there was a deep cut above one eye. She looked so young, barely out of her teens, and Mackie felt sick all over again.

"I know," Mackie finally said. "I'm going to take him back to Tennessee. Is that okay with you? He won't come back here and bother you."

She thought about this and then nodded. "I'll get you some rope," she said.

He drove ten miles above the speed limit, his son tied up in the back seat, groggy, shouting obscenities. He stopped only for gas, pissing in a bottle, letting his son wet himself rather than untie him. His son kept struggling against the ropes, lying on his stomach, his ankles tied to his bound wrists, but Mackie had fashioned the knots well, the added pressure only cinching the knots tighter. "Well, I'm gonna shit in my pants, you asshole," his son yelled from the back seat. "I'm your son and you're going to let me shit in my pants." He let his son shit in his pants.

After five hours, his son fell asleep and Mackie had the rest of the drive to think about what he'd done. He thought about it for five minutes and then focused on the road, counting billboards, watching for highway patrol cars. He knew when they reached Tennessee, he couldn't keep his son there. He couldn't keep fighting his son, knocking him out and hoping he'd awaken a better person. He'd do what he could, help him find a job, get him an apartment. He'd fix his son and then hope it stuck.

Back home, in the garage, when he dragged his son out of the car, reeking of sweat and piss and shit, Mackie told him about his plan. "You stay here and we find something for you to do and you get yourself straight." His son fell into a corner of the garage. "I don't do drugs," he said. It's not like that." Mackie shook his head. "I know that. I wish it were that easy. You're a good boy, Jackson; you just get too angry. You need to understand that things happen and they're usually bad, and you just figure out how to deal with it without beating somebody up or killing their dog or setting their tree on fire. Do you understand?"

Jackson slid a finger into his mouth and spit blood. "One of my teeth is loose."

"Will you try?" Mackie asked his son. Jackson nodded and went inside to take a shower while Mackie climbed back into the car, pressed his face against the steering wheel, and kept himself from crying.

"Fucking deer," Jackson kept saying. "Fucking dead, three-legged, no account deer." They were on dry land now, both cold, getting colder in the wind. They had stripped out of their wet clothes, father and son now in their wet boxer shorts, shivering, their hair dripping cold water down their bodies. Neither had thought to bring a change of clothes. "This," Jackson said, "is getting worse."

The deer, sans leg, was still beautiful. It was an eight-point buck, the cold having preserved the skin except for a small wound at its chest and the exit wound near its right back leg. A hunter must have shot it and chased it into the pond, then decided it wasn't worth the effort, or perhaps never even found it. Either way, it was here now, dead, glassy-eyed, lying in the grass between Mackie and Jackson.

"We should bury it," Jackson said. "Cindy said to bury it." It was a nice idea, but the ground was too cold for that. The county dump was closed until Monday. "Well, we can't leave it here," Jackson shouted, "Fucking deer." Mackie thought if they could get a tarp under the deer, they could drag it to Jackson's truck and dump it on the side of the highway. "Someone from the city will come get it," Mackie told his son. Jackson seemed reluctant to agree. "Fucking deer." He finally nodded and Mackie went to find a tarp, to wrap up this deer, and to get through the day, freezing cold, soaked to the bone, but otherwise undamaged.

Two months after he brought Jackson back home, his son now servicing and setting up video poker machines at strip clubs and gas stations, the phone rang again in the middle of the night. It was Amy, her voice as soft as the first time he'd talked to her.

"Is he okay?" she asked.

"Are you okay?" he asked her. "I want to know that first, because if you aren't, I'll go make him worse."

She started to cry. "I'm okay, I think," she said. "I'm better without him here."

He told her that Jackson was trying harder to be a good person.

"I had hoped that he would turn out to be a good person," she said, "but I couldn't stay with him long enough to find out."

Mackie couldn't think of a response that would help anything and so he stayed silent.

"I wanted to thank you," she said, still whispering, as if concerned that Jackson might be listening to them. "You helped me and I wanted to thank you for that."

Before he could answer, she hung up the phone. He kept the receiver against his ear, listening to the dial tone, waiting for her to come back on the line.

Mackie was in the shed, nearly naked, looking for a tarp, when Cindy nudged the door open. "This must not be going well," she said, avoiding eye contact with Mackie.

"Do you have a tarp?" Mackie asked.

"We have extra clothes," Cindy said. "You don't have to use a tarp for that."

"No, I need a tarp to wrap up the deer. Extra clothes would be nice though."

"You can't bury the deer?"

"No." He felt unable to explain any further and she didn't push the issue. He found himself liking Cindy more and more.

After he located an orange tarp, wrapped up like a sleeping bag, Cindy waved him into the house, and he stepped into the warmth, a fire going. She handed him some clothes for both himself and Jackson and he put on an ill-fitting shirt, pants that were too tight and left unzipped, and squeezed his feet into shoes two sizes too small for him. "How is he doing?" she asked him. "He's doing fine. We just got a little wet trying to get the deer."

"Anything could set him off, I've learned," she said. "The smallest thing; you never know."

"He's fine," he said. "I'll bring him the clothes and he'll be fine."



At his son's wedding, waiting off to the side of the altar, groom and best man, Mackie rehearsed his toast in his head. Jackson put his hand on Mackie's shoulder and said, "Thank you for all this. You made this happen." Mackie shrugged. "I didn't do much," he said. "You knocked me out, tied me up, brought me back here, and helped me get a job. You did a lot." Mackie told him that he didn't want any thanks, that he was just happy he'd cleaned himself up, had found a nice woman, was settling down.

"You saved me from that woman," Jackson said.

"You mean Amy?" Mackie asked.

"Yeah, she was a bad influence. She made me think things would always be happy, nothing but good times, but that's not reality. She really had me off the rails, and you came and got me away from all that, and I want to thank you."

"I don't want any thanks for that."

Jackson pulled the flask out of Mackie's coat pocket, his gift to his father for being the best man. He took a swig of whiskey. "I filled it before I gave it to you," Jackson told his father. "So that's two gifts I gave you."

When Mackie got back to the pond, Jackson was beating the deer with his raised boot, shouting curses, now totally naked, his strikes stripping wet chunks of fur from the animal's body. Mackie dropped the tarp and the clothes and charged after his son. "Stop," he shouted. "Jackson, that don't help a goddamned thing. Just stop."

Jackson pushed his father and kept hitting the deer with the boot. "A perfect day before this fucking deer showed up," he screamed. Water was dribbling from the deer's mouth, its eyes wide open.

"Calm down, Jackson," Mackie shouted again, pulling his son away from the deer. Yanking his arm free, Jackson whirled around and punched Mackie, catching his right cheekbone, which caused Mackie to wince and release his son. Jackson ran away from Mackie and the deer, through the woods, making sounds that seemed like sobbing.

Mackie lay out the tarp and rolled the deer onto it, the water still deep in the deer's body. He knew better than to wait for his son to return. He pulled the corners of the tarp together and dragged the deer as best as he could through the woods, stopping every few minutes when his hands got too sore. He thought to leave the deer on his son's front lawn, but realized it would be cruel to the deer, the further abuse Jackson would inflict on it. Mackie knew he would just have to take responsibility for this dead thing, until he could find a way to put it to rest.

He could see Cindy through the window of the house. She was frowning, continually looking over her shoulder at what Mackie imagined was Jackson, hiding until he was gone. He lifted the deer into the back seat of his car, shoving it into the spaces that it would go, trying to make it fit. The passenger seat was now folded forward to accommodate the head and neck of the animal, the mouth of the deer now peeking out from the tarp. There was still frost on the deer's whiskers. He waved to Cindy, who did not wave back, and drove down the mountain, the air conditioner on to keep the deer from thawing out too much, to keep the smell of decay away from his senses.

Back home, in the garage, Mackie tried to think of what to do about the deer. The options were just as limited as they were at Jackson's house. He did not want to bury this deer, the hours upon hours of breaking through the frozen earth, no matter how much



better he thought it would make him feel. It wouldn't change anything. He would dig a hole and fill it back, and everything would be the same.

His teeth were chattering. His nose wouldn't stop running. He checked the rear-view mirror and noticed the skin under his right eye was starting to swell from where Jackson had punched him. He opened the tarp and stared at the deer's dead eyes. He rubbed the condensation from its snout. He knew he had to get out of the car, to get the deer out of the car, but he couldn't do it, not just yet. He sat in his garage, the deer beside him, and tried to catch his breath. He waited for the muscles of his heart to send blood throughout his body, to make him warm again.

MICHAEL WALLS

HARD RAIN

*You won't have a name when you ride
the big airplane. All they will call you
will be deportee.*

—Woody Guthrie

Friday morning. Downward looking men with brown skin, orange vests and baseball caps descend on McGill Place Condominiums – mowing, weeding, blowing leaves. Each time I pass them, hear the music of their talk, I wish again that I could understand, that I could know their stories, the routes they took from dirt roads in Chiapas or Mazatenango to here, where they're to keep the lawn green, the flowers blooming outside my building. Did they wade the river? Did they cross the desert at a place where laws make criminals of people who leave them water? Today, we stand together beneath a stairway, pouring rain only inches from our faces. I wait for a break to make a run to my car. They get a break from the heat. Only one, thin as the leaf blower cocked on his hip, returns a timid smile. *Mucho aqua. Si, mucho aqua.*