

Mack Truck

by Artemis Savory

Mack has been hit by a Mack Truck more than once. I know this because he tells me the story often. It is fuzzy though, because I ignore him every time he shares it. When I tell my family about the things that Mack has narrated to me, they look at me funny, like maybe I am telling a joke or making up a story of my own. I try not to feel offended. My stepmother at the time tells me that she loves his stories. In the future, she'll tell me that he was her favorite of all my boyfriends.

* * *

Summer after high school I'm nineteen and running around the Methuen strip mall, in Massachusetts, in my camouflage skirt and tank top to match. No shoes. My bare feet smack against large slabs of the concrete walkway. I leap from column to column, the short round structures meant for sitting, not standing. That day, I had just totaled my car, whose name had been Mack.

This guy in camouflage watches me. He is standing outside Chuck E. Cheese with a friend, smoking a cigarette. He will tell me that he is nineteen too. He is tall, has red hair and his clothes are baggy and all grunge. "Redneck," my friends call him. But he calls himself Mack. It should be a foreshadowing that my last Mack ended in disaster, but I'm not paying attention.

"I go four-wheeling all the time," he tells me. "I live in Lawrence with my stepdad." I learn that he is into cars and trucks and he reminds me of the junkyard back home, of my father who taught me how to drive a car when I was twelve, and a quad when I was younger. I think that maybe Mack will be fun.

I let him drive me away from the mall in his pickup truck. Later I will hold my breath when he kisses me with his mouth that tastes like ash. I will let him slide his fingers under my skirt. Sometimes this will happen in the Market Basket parking lot and once in the woods behind the store. Later, when this is all over, when Mack is gone, I will force myself to walk through these woods and enjoy them without reminiscing; I will hold back the memories, black them out for myself.

* * *

"I was born in Ireland," Mack tells me. He lets me help him on errands. We stop at his mother's apartment complex to gather trash barrels from the back of the parking lot, and he swings them up—I catch them and place them down in the bed of the truck. I love that he lets me help, because I'm tired of boys who won't let me help because I'm a girl, synonymous with weakling. We need to bring the trash barrels somewhere later.

When we go inside I meet his mother. She is short and skinny, and a redhead like her son. She is kind, and, while Mack is in the bathroom, I ask if he was really born in Ireland. "I was pregnant in Ireland," she says. "But no, he was born here in the US."

When Mack gets out of the bathroom he tells me it's time to go. Out in the car he yells at me for asking his mother questions. "I don't know why it bothers you that I asked if you were born in Ireland or not," I yell back. "Why does that make you mad?"

"It's disrespectful," he says, "You should just trust me."

* * *

Mack drives fast down the winding city streets of Lawrence and Methuen. He whips down a straightaway lined with so many cars on either side that it's practically a one-car road. Speed limit twenty-five; Mack

ISSUE ARCHIVE

[Issue 22: Winter/Spring 2023](#)
[Issue 21: Summer/Fall 2022](#)
[Issue 20: Winter/Spring 2022](#)
[Issue 19: Summer/Fall 2021](#)
[Issue 18: Winter/Spring 2021](#)
[Issue 17: Summer/Fall 2020](#)
[Issue 16: Winter/Spring 2020](#)
[Issue 15: Summer/Fall 2019](#)
[Issue 14: Winter/Spring 2019](#)
[Issue 13: Summer/Fall 2018](#)
[Issue 12: Winter/Spring 2018](#)
[Issue 11: Summer/Fall 2017](#)
[Issue 10: Winter/Spring 2017](#)
[Issue 9: Summer/Fall 2016](#)
[Issue 8: Winter/Spring 2016](#)
[Issue 7: Summer/Fall 2015](#)
[Issue 6: Winter/Spring 2015](#)
[Issue 5: Summer/Fall 2014](#)
[Issue 4: Winter/Spring 2014](#)
[Issue 3: Summer/Fall 2013](#)
[Issue 2: Winter/Spring 2013](#)
[Issue 1: Spring 2012](#)

GENRE ARCHIVE

[Creative Nonfiction](#)
[Essays](#)
[Fiction](#)
[Flash Prose](#)
[Lunch Specials](#)
[Poetry](#)
[Interviews](#)
[Translation](#)
[Visual Art](#)
[Writing for Young People](#)

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MIDNIGHT SNACK

A destination for all your late night obsessions.

limit sixty. At first it is exhilarating, freeing, exciting. Once, as we're stopped at a red light just outside Richdale in North Andover, red and blue lights flash behind us and Mack pulls over.

"Why were you driving so erratically?" The cop demands. I am frightened. (I also wonder if Mack knows what "erratically" means. I've never heard a cop use such a big word before.)

"My brother is John, he's a Marine," Mack defends, as if military connections compensate for erratic behavior, as if irrationality is the answer to life's problems. John used to be a police officer, it seems. Mack gets a warning, I think, but it isn't written, and I wonder if knowing someone really just worked for him. It makes me uncomfortable and a little pissed. If I don't stop completely at a stop sign I'll get a ticket, while Mack will feed his brother's name and get away with driving in a way that could get people killed.

* * *

In the fall, nearly a month after we begin dating, he brings me to his house where he lives with his former stepdad. There are hundreds or thousands of golf balls in the shed under the hill outside. Maybe it used to be a bomb shelter or a bunker. I wish it was empty so I could crawl inside and explore. It feels like that's what I'm doing with Mack right now: exploring him, trying to figure out what draws me in. The kitchen looks lived-in: floor unclean, dishes in the sink, a terrible smell. But I won't notice this until later. For now it just reminds me of Dad's house when it was messy before he had a girlfriend.

He shows me a melted cell phone in an extra room. "It was my brother's," he says. "It got destroyed in his wreck. The wreck that killed him. See—it's half-melted." His twin brother, he says, got into an accident with—can you guess?—a Mack Truck. Only he didn't survive. I am overcome with grief for his loss and agree to lie nearly naked with him on the couch in this room. It's a thing I've never done before, and it feels uncomfortable but interesting; daring, maybe. I leave my shirt on.

When we come here again, I'll meet his stepfather, who sits on the living room couch and smokes cigarette after cigarette. He isn't talkative, and I don't know how to make a good impression, and I don't want Mack getting mad at me for asking questions, so I don't say anything.

* * *

There's a popular song on the radio around this time in 2006. It goes, "Where oh where can my baby be, the lord took her away from me..." It's by the Cavaliers and the story goes that the narrator was driving and got into an accident, and his girlfriend died in his arms. I begin to fear for my life after the cop pulls us over. With no reprimands, why would Mack ever choose to drive safely?

One day, as he's driving fast down a crowded city road I ask, "What if something happens with the way you drive? What if you get me killed?"

"It won't happen," he says, like we're invincible, and takes my hand. "I won't let anything happen to you." But his foot stays planted on the gas.

* * *

I have an off-and-on victim mentality. As soon as I get nervous, I begin to blame other people for the way I feel. But there's something unnerving about Mack that I feel I maybe should have paid attention to early on. I believe that Mack cares about me, but I don't understand him or how he feels. I can't get inside his head.

One day he calls to say that he dedicated a song to me on the radio. "Lips of an Angel." "Because your voice is like an angel's," he tells me, and I think it's sweet. I sing constantly, because it's one of the only things that I feel like I'm good at. I keep wishing that I could have been sitting in my car and listening to the station when he dedicated it.

But it isn't long before I begin to wonder if he really did call and dedicate a song, or if he just invented that story to make me feel romanticized. When Mack and I end a few months later, I'll tell a friend about the song, and he'll tell me that the story is about a man who cheats on his girlfriend with an ex. If you listen to the lyrics, he's talking to her on the phone in another room so his current girlfriend can't hear him. Am I being deceived?

* * *

After tonight, the kitchen looks dirty, and I can see the grimy

When Mack and I are ready to move beyond naked bed-lying, we go into his room and close the door, and I set up my sex mix: a mix I've

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yellow stains on the bathroom floor; ashtrays line the house, overflowing onto tables and the hardwood floors.

made for just this occasion. I think this is romantic and necessary, but I won't take my shirt off.

I sing to the lyrics playing while we have sex, or rather, while he has sex with me. "Closer," by Nine Inch Nails; "I Hate Everything About You;"

a plethora of Evanescence and Korn, Slipknot, and Disturbed. The music is distracting, but it becomes my salve. We have sex for what feels like hours, and he keeps going even when I'm dry and it hurts but I don't want to say anything. I don't want to be a tease or upset him.

When it's over, he goes to the bathroom first, and I lie in bed and wait, still singing to my songs, focusing on the lyrics so I don't have to think about what just happened and how unromantic and painful it was because sex is supposed to be this thing that makes everything okay or better, or that's how it feels to me. When it's my turn to go pee, I sit on the toilet and find myself soaked. He pissed all over the toilet seat and left it that way. When I tell him this, he laughs.

After tonight, the kitchen looks dirty, and I can see the grimy yellow stains on the bathroom floor; ashtrays line the house, overflowing onto tables and the hardwood floors. The birdcage in the living room is piled high with droppings. I wonder if the cage has ever been cleaned, and how the bird feels living helplessly in its own squalor. The best decision I've made, I decide, was not to take my shirt off. It's a small victory that feels powerful.

* * *

The small window in the passenger seat of Mack's truck is broken so that I can push it open without having to squeeze the little button on the inside. One night we're in a parking lot outside of a grocery store. Mack locks the keys in the car by accident. I try reminding him about the broken window, but before I've finished speaking, he pulls his fist back and punches a hole through the glass. I stare at him incredulously, and then push the window open to show him what I'd been trying to say. "You didn't have to do that," I say, and then I look at his hand, which is bleeding profusely. "Let me help you. Let's go in the store."

"I can do it," he says, when I try to look more closely. "I don't need help." And he walks to the store by himself. This feels like a burn, although I'm not sure why. Maybe because helping someone heal is one of the most intimate experiences I have known.

For years I have taken inventory of injuries, both my own and others'. During the first few months that I dated Anthony, back in high school, I wiped out on my bike and wound up in the hospital. I can still remember fear consuming me as I woke up and saw him standing at the end of my bed crying. A few months later, he got jumped and some guys left a cut above his eyebrow so deep that he needed stitches. These moments of pain morphed into more than mere misery or suffering because I connected them to stories and emotions. There was care on Anthony's face when he saw me hurt, and I felt empathy when he told me that he was getting stitches. I feared his walks through the city later. But Mack hides his pain from me. He hides it from everyone.

* * *

Mack says this to me one day: "My mom thinks I'm Mack," who is apparently his dead twin. The guy I am dating? His real name is Mike, he admits. The idea of this is shocking, although I can't believe it. When I look at his license again, I notice that he is really seventeen, and I point this out, because Mack told me he was nineteen when we met. "Well, this is Mack's license." The twin—the twin who was two years younger than my boyfriend?

Part of me wants to believe everything. I want to believe that Mack isn't a liar, and that crazy stories really do happen every day.

Sometimes in my journal I write fiction. Sometimes it's incredible or vile—like getting raped or finding a dead body—or it's dreams not labeled as dreams. Nightmares become real in the pages of my journal where fiction isn't separate from fact. Maybe Mack's mind works this way. Maybe he comes up with a story so interesting that he can't separate it from the rest of his life until he realizes that his Truth is being questioned, and then he gets mad because he doesn't know what else to do.

* * *

Mack calls me once, early in our relationship. He tells me that something is wrong, he can't breathe, and he's driving to his mom's house. When I get there, he's on her living room floor with paramedics leaning

over him. They tell me not to follow the ambulance, but I do anyway because I don't know how to get to the hospital. When I find him on a bed, IV in his arm, his stepdad is there. He is calling Mack names, insulting him, angry with him, and leaves the room when I enter. I remember my own brush with the hospital, when I cut myself too deep and my parents found out, and my dad asked why I didn't just roll around in poison ivy if I liked pain so much, because he didn't understand what was happening. I don't see Mack's mom. No one cares about him. Everyone needs love.

<blockquote class="bq-right">For years I have taken inventory of injuries, both my own and others'. During the first few months that I dated Anthony, back in high school, I wiped out on my bike and wound up in the hospital. I can still remember fear consuming me as I woke up and saw him standing at the end of my bed crying.</blockquote>

I hold his hand and tell him I love him. It's a lie. Maybe worse than all the lies he'll tell me. His stepdad will tell me that Mack overdosed on speed. Or maybe it's the mall rats who say it. The mall rats will inform me that Mack wasn't a virgin and he's been telling everyone that he told me he was. For now, Mack keeps telling me that he doesn't know what happened, just that he doesn't feel good. And I am holding his hand and lying to him, telling him I love him.

* * *

When I stop calling Mack, he doesn't call me either. He'll tell people at the mall that he dumped me, when really we just stopped talking. Months later, he'll call to talk to me, and I'll confess that I never really loved him.

Maybe as much as a year after our breakup, I'll be standing at Winnekenni Park in Haverhill at the edge of Kenoza Lake, when I check my voicemail and hear a message from him: "I'm going to drive off this cliff and I just wanted to say goodbye..." It's more than a minute in length. And even though I know he's probably bullshitting, as always, my heart picks up and I'm nervous for him. I care about him in the way that I'd be concerned about a stranger. I try calling back, but his phone doesn't ring and instead goes straight to voicemail.

I imagine his body lying in a ditch somewhere. But someone at the mall mentions that they saw Mack the other day, and I'll be reassured that his suicide message was really an attention attempt. I'll forget about him and move on, away from craziness, from lies. Or so I believe.



Artemis Savory is a writer with a passion for creative nonfiction. She prefers hiking and writing to anything else, and you can find her work in a number of magazines and on her *Starving Artist* blog at ArtemisSavory.com.

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