

Mack is Back

My senior class consisted of one-hundred-and-forty-six students. The number included everyone, whether they graduated or not, and farm kids from neighboring communities too small for a school of their own. Most of us had known each other since kindergarten. As a teenager, any time I'd have a stirring of attraction, I'd remember the dirt clod fight I had with the guy when I was eight, or how when I was ten, he'd teased me about needing a bra.

Somehow, I never met Mack McKenzie when I was younger. He was a year older. In elementary school, I went to public and he went to Catholic. In junior high, when we should have attended the same school, he'd been such a handful that his mother had shipped him off to live with his father in California.

Of course, I knew of Mack. He'd been somewhat infamous, returning on school breaks to visit his mother and siblings. He'd roll into town on his motorcycle, shaggy hair flying, and whispers would spread, "*Mack is back.*" His real name was Donald, but no one called him that.

The night before my high school class reunion, I thought about him. How could I not think about Mack as I sat with my laptop on my old twin bed at my folk's house, perusing our reunion page on Facebook? I had checked the "Going" list multiple times over the last few days, cataloguing memories and trying to remember faces that had faded into indistinct blurs. I checked the list one more time. Like magic, there was his name, Mack McKenzie, jumping off the screen, shaking me to my core.

For one thing, my husband had begged out. I understood. In the Eastern Washington farm community I called home, the summer heat intensified the stench blowing from the feedlot, and there wasn't much to do other than *sit and visit*. Bottom line, I'd be flying solo. For another, Mack didn't actually graduate from my high school. Not that it mattered. Everyone considered him a classmate, so why wouldn't he be invited to the combined classes of 1986, 1987, and 1988 Twenty-Five Year Reunion?

For years, I wondered what happened to him. Was he married? Did he have children? Did he marry one of the trashy girls he dated after we broke up? Or did he marry a nice homebody who cooked dinner every night? According to my limited access to his profile, he was married. Because we weren't *friends*, I couldn't read any further. If his picture wasn't deceiving, he'd grown into a handsome man.

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At seventeen, he'd been a good-looking boy. On the summer day I met him, I had come home from the A & W, where I'd worked as a carhop—yes, an actual carhop, hooking trays laden with root beer mugs to car windows and making change with a coin changer hooked to my belt—and he was sitting on a stool in our family room with a towel draped around his shoulders while my sister, Carol, cut his hair. From the kitchen, I had a profile view of him. Sunlight streamed through the window, creating auburn highlights in his almost black hair. He wore a short sleeved t-shirt, and his muscles bulged more than most of the boys I knew, which I later learned was the result of him being a competitive boxer.

He murmured something, and Carol laughed, pointing the comb in her hand at him. He snatched it away with his teeth. My sister only dated trouble.

I took a pan out of the cupboard and set it on the stove. The clanking caught his attention, and he turned with the long, black comb still between his teeth. Dimples and blue eyes hit me like Cupid's arrow. He took the comb out of his mouth, and something hung in the air between us. Carol's pursed look said, "*You bitch.*" I would have gone to my room, but my mother had instructed me to make cheese enchiladas for dinner. Carol swiveled Mack's stool, but while she clipped his hair, he stole glances.

As soon as she shook the towel off him, Mack sauntered to where I was frying tortillas. He leaned against our avocado-green Formica counter while Carol shot silent daggers at me. I wanted to tell her, "*I'm not doing anything.*"

I truly wasn't intentionally doing anything, but I was feeling a whole lot of something, a disconcertingly heated energy pulling on me. It came from Mack, or maybe it was my energy flying at Mack. Whatever it was, I knew he felt it, too. It was just there, in the air buzzing around us like two magnets pulling together.

Mack peeked in the pot. "What're you cooking?"

I stirred the sauce, not looking at him, afraid of risking more of my sister's justifiable ire. "Um, enchilada sauce."

"Smells really good. Can I have a taste?"

I looked at Carol, who was now in the kitchen glaring at me. She walked over, grabbed a spoon, dipped it in the sauce, and held it up to his mouth. "Here, I'll feed you."

He took it out of her hand. "Think I can handle it." He licked the spoon clean and smiled at me. "You're a great cook."

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After a few minutes of Mack hovering, my mother came home and saved me from my sister's wrath. Completely clueless to the situation, Mom invited Mack to stay for dinner. He wisely declined, and Carol walked him out. A few minutes later, I heard his motorcycle rumble away. Carol stalked back in the house and straight to her room. I knew it was over between them, and she knew it was my fault.

The next night, I cruised up and down 6th Avenue with my friend, Gloria, in my dad's old Datsun pickup. About two blocks long, 6th Avenue's main attractions on one side of the street were Speck Motors, Mod-o-Day, JC Penney, and the Skunk Tavern, and on the other was Walter's Drug, Sunny Bakery, and the Hallmark store. A Safeway marked the end in one direction and a general store called the Totem Pole in the other. As teenagers, we spent hours driving down the avenue, turning around in the Safeway parking lot, cruising back up the avenue, and flipping U-turns at the Totem Pole before doing it all over again. Along the way, we gossiped and flirted, hoping to meet cute boys.

I kept an eye out for one particular boy that night. It only took a couple loops before Mack and his buddy stopped beside my pickup in front of Safeway.

Mack rolled down his window. "Hey, what're you up to?"

I laughed. "Just cruising around."

"I was hoping to see you tonight."

"Oh, yeah?"

"Yeah, definitely hoping to see you."

There was that feeling again, buzzing between us. We both got out of our cars and sat on the trunk of his friend's Camaro, leaving our friends to make do without us for a few minutes.

"So, here's the thing," he said. "I know it's kind of bad of me, and I get it if you say no, but I'd really like to take you out tomorrow night."

Even though Mack and Carol barely dated, and he'd only been to our house once, it *was* bad. It broke the sister rules, but I'd never been so drawn to anyone. Being around him gave me a warm feeling all over, which completely threw me. I never went for guys like Mack. Serious, college-bound athletes were more my type. I had no doubt Mack smoked pot and hadn't been a virgin for years. He rode a motorcycle and wore black AC/DC emblazoned t-shirts.

"Okay, where would you like to take me?"

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He grinned and dimples appeared in his cheeks. “I don’t know.” He shook his head. “I’ll think of something.”

I hadn’t set out to steal him from my sister, but I did. Carol and I were never that close despite only being a year apart, but to her credit, she took the news with more grace than I would have. In the end, my mother was more upset about it than Carol.

“How could you? You do know Carol was dating him?”

“Mom, I don’t care,” Carol intervened. “Allie can go out with him if she wants.”

Apparently, Carol had already moved on to a new guy. My mother threw up her hands and left it to us.

Later, Carol tried to warn me about Mack. “Allie, I’m not saying this to be bitchy, but I can’t see you and Mack having much fun together. You know he’s kind of wild, right?”

Carol could have saved her breath. It was too late. I was already Mack crazed.

The next day, I spent all afternoon getting ready for the date. After trying on everything in my closet, I settled on my pink polo shirt, white Guess jean skirt, and pink jelly flats. I ditched my standard ponytail and let my long dark hair cascade in loose waves down my back. Spritzing myself with Love’s Baby Soft perfume, I felt pretty.

When he picked me up, he wasn’t on his motorcycle. He’d borrowed his sister’s car, and traded his faded blue jeans and t-shirt for a pair of corduroys and a blue button-down shirt. He walked me to the passenger’s side of the car and opened the door for me, so polite and sweet.

We went to the Benton County Fair. The mint harvest was in full swing and the warm night air smelled especially good. We walked around holding hands, looking at exhibits, but mainly gazed at each other and talked. I don’t remember any awkward moments, but at one point, we both started to tremble, not from nerves, but from giddiness. Then Mack led me behind the small animal barn. We reached for each other simultaneously. The moment he secured me against his chest and his mouth claimed me, my whole body sighed and the trembling stopped. Kissing him was like sinking into a warm, soothing bath while fireworks exploded around me.

There was no question that we were a couple after that night. We didn’t discuss it. We didn’t have to. We simply were. We spent every day together until he had to go back to California for his senior year of high school. He came back every school vacation to see me. In

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between, we talked on the phone and exchanged letters. He straightened up a bit for me, and I loosened up a bit for him. It worked for both of us. I loved him and he loved me.

Walking into the Grizzly's for the reunion, I scoped the country bar but didn't see him. Soon, old classmates surrounded me, and a friend was reminding me of our midnight cherry orchard raids when I noticed a really handsome man across the dance floor. Even though I'd been married a long time, I was still aware when a man checked me out. He checked me out more than once. Then, someone said Mack was here and pointed to that very same handsome man.

One second I sat at the table, and the next I stood in front of him. I don't remember crossing through the disco lights, but I must have. A woman I didn't know flanked his right, and a man I vaguely recognized stood on his left. Mack stared at me as if he'd seen a ghost before yanking me close against his chest.

He let go, stepped back, and looked sheepishly at the woman. "Sorry, this is my wife, Constance, and this is Rosemary."

Rosemary. *Rosemary?* "No, I'm Allie. You don't remember me, do you?" He looked confused. It seemed funny. Here I'd built up this idea in my head that we'd had this relationship he could never forget, and he didn't even remember my name. I turned to his wife and laughed, trying to make light of it. "Apparently, your husband likes to hug random women."

"Allie, I remember you. How could I not remember you? I got flustered. I didn't know you'd be here. You were talking to Rosemary and then you were in front of me, and" All of us laughed, including his wife. "Allie and I dated in high school," he explained to his wife. "She was a *nice* girl." It was *nice* of him to clarify. "She was about the only girlfriend I had that my mother actually liked."

"What was not to like?" I joked. "I *was* a nice girl."

"I dated her sister first," he said to his wife. "That was kind of bad."

"It was," I agreed.

"I didn't handle it well, but you were so *beautiful*."

I wanted to say, "*So were you,*" but his wife stood next to us, listening while we re-discovered each other and dealt with a flood of emotions. I had an impulse to apologize to her, but that would have been even more awkward. "Thank you."

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He grinned at me as if we were still teenagers. His wife smiled tightly. “What do you do now, Allie? Are you married?”

Mack flushed and both of us regained some composure.

“I’m an events coordinator and been married for twenty years. My husband’s in marketing, and we have two girls. How about you?”

Hearing my marital status, she visibly relaxed. After a few polite back and forth questions, one of Mack’s old buddies momentarily diverted her attention.

Mack tipped his head toward me and whispered low enough that no one else could hear, “I really liked you.”

No, you loved me. Of course, he couldn’t say it with his wife two feet away. “I know.”

“I really, *really* liked you.”

And I loved you, too. “I was pretty crazy about you, too.”

My friends said we talked for a long time, but I don’t remember it being very long. It felt like a blink. I found out he went to college after we broke up and now owned an insurance business. Mack and his wife didn’t have children, and I wondered why that was.

After a while, I tired of the mundane facts and had an overwhelming urge to steal him away. I wanted to lie in bed with him, like we did in high school, naked from the waist up, and talk. I wanted to hear all about his life. I wanted to make love to him because I so regretted being such a *nice* girl in high school. I lost my virginity to a boy in college who meant nothing to me when my first time should have been with Mack, who at one time had meant everything.

I wanted to tell him so many things, things he would want to hear, but I couldn’t. He didn’t belong to me anymore, and I felt my husband’s presence six hundred and fifty miles away. But I had to tell Mack one thing, one thing I thought it was important for him to know. Something he deserved to know. I waited until he was standing alone, his wife in the bathroom, and glided next to him.

“You were the only boy I ever said *I love you to* besides my husband,” I whispered.

“Same here. Please tell me I said it a lot.”

“You did.” Many, many times. I still had his love letters tucked away in a special box. There had been times when I felt guilty about keeping them, but he’d been my first love and destroying his letters wouldn’t erase memories etched in my heart.

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He gazed at me. “I knew you’d still be beautiful.”

“Thank you. You’re very sweet. Always were.”

“Nice to know I didn’t imagine everything between us.”

“You didn’t.”

“You know, when I’d have to go back to California?”

“Yeah?”

“I never cheated on you. Not once. I only wanted you. I have nothing but good memories. So many good memories.”

“Me, too. I’ve thought about you over the years.”

“Jesus Allie, so have I.” His eyes focused on mine, and that old feeling buzzed thick between us. We both looked away and continued to talk while we watched former classmates dance to *Love Shack*. “Do you remember the first night I asked you out? On 6th Avenue?”

“Yeah, I do.”

“I was looking for you.” He paused and our eyes briefly met. “I’ve never stopped looking for you.” After all these years, a part of each of us still belonged to the other. “Do you remember that time we were parked and a policeman knocked on the window? The night I almost got into that fight?”

“Of course, you were upset, and I wanted to distract you. I thought the best way was to jump on your lap.”

He smiled. “You were *really good* at distracting me. I remember always being so comfortable with you.”

“Yeah. With you, I could be the nice girl, but still have fun.”

“You were fun.” His smile and tone told me he remembered as clearly as I did the nights we’d spent half-naked, rubbing against each other. “*A lot of fun.*” We both laughed. “I don’t remember why we broke up.”

I did. He respected me too much to push me into having full-on sex, but he was eighteen and had already graduated from high school. After a while, rubbing against me wasn’t enough. I could feel how frustrating the situation was becoming for him. I was only seventeen. I wanted to go to college and see the world. He worked as an auto mechanic and wanted me cooking dinner for him. In a small town where kids routinely married straight out of high school, I could

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see where we were headed. I loved him in such a big way, but I wasn't ready to be in an adult relationship. I hurt for a long time after we split, and he hurt so much he left town.

“We were too young.”

He nodded. “If anything ever happens, if your husband ever dies or you get divorced, will you let me know?”

He hadn't been drinking. It wasn't alcohol talking. I think if I grabbed his hand and pulled him outside, he would have followed me. It snapped me out of my nostalgic wine-buzzed haze. He had a lovely wife of fifteen years walking toward us. I had a good man waiting for me at home. A man I loved very much and with whom I had built a life and had children.

He must've realized what he'd implied. “I love her.”

“It was really good seeing you. I'm so happy life has turned out well for you.”

I walked away, having fallen a little in love with him all over again, but knowing he was my past and had no place in my future.