

TRUCKING IS A WAY OF LIFE,
AND THIS GIRL'S IN IT
FOR THE LONG HAUL.

An illustration of a young girl with long brown hair, wearing a grey t-shirt and pink shorts, sitting on the hood of a red semi-truck. She is holding and reading a map. A black cat is perched on the hood next to her. The truck is red with a large chrome grille and two tall exhaust stacks. The background shows a sunset or sunrise sky with orange and pink clouds, and a sign for 'BUS' is visible in the distance.

BIG RIG

LOUISE HAWES

FOR THE RECORD

My father drives an eighteen-wheeler. My mother died a week after I was born. And even though this is *not* a ghost story, the three of us have been on the road together for seven years.

I don't mean that Mom is some shapeless blob of ectoplasm or that she rides in her own seat, moves furniture around, and talks to us from the ether. I mean that, ever since I was little, Daddy and I have traveled with a green marble box with her ashes inside. I mean that my dad loves her so much, and I dream and think about her so often, it feels like she's part of our team.

So yes, all three of us have logged over 560,000 miles, spent the night in 310 cities, and listened to 1,430 audiobooks. I know because I handle the GPS, read the maps (Daddy says technology is fine, as long as you don't count on it), keep the logs, and, since my father is all for equal votes on entertainment, choose half the books we listen to.

Which is why I also know I might have to change that audiobook total back to 1,429. (I like to keep really accurate log data, but I hate to erase things that leave smudge marks for weigh-station fusbudgets to cluck their tongues over.) Why am I seeing smudge marks in my

future? Because just now, headed east on 80 toward Iowa City, my father pulled onto the shoulder of the highway and yanked a CD out of the deck after only a few minutes. It was my turn to choose, and I was really looking forward to *Zombie Lullaby*, which I think is a great title. In the opening scene, there have already been three bloodcurdling murders, one excellently scary undead villain, and a severed head that doesn't talk but just rolls around moaning and looking beseechingly at everyone it bumps into.

Maybe the head was too much for Daddy, because now he leans across the cab and waves the disc in front of me. "You're eleven years old, Hazel, for-crying-out-loud," he says. "And this book is much too violent."

I decide not to mention that my birthday is less than six months away, which makes me almost twelve.

When my father, who's tall and mostly arms and legs, makes big, I-know-what's-best-for-you gestures and gets in my face like this, our truck's cab feels way too small. Normally? It may not be wide enough for jumping jacks, but there's plenty of room to read, sleep, and eat. Suddenly, though, I need more space; I want to look out the window, find tiny doll people riding in the four-wheelers down there, or watch the sky and highway streaming past like they're caught in a windy river.

Instead, I sit up straight, look Daddy right in his eyes, where I can reach him. "How about we at least get to know the main characters?" I ask.

My father used to be an English lit professor, and he's always talking about how the people in books are what make the difference. "People, not plot." He says that all the time.

Now he just shakes his head, half smiles. "Good guys or bad?" he asks.

I look at the green marble box Velcroed to our dash. "Let's ask Mom," I say.

We're both quiet. We look toward the box, swirly and elegant stone on the outside, ashes sealed inside. And we wait.

"She says either one will work," I tell Daddy after a while. He sighs, then hands me the CD. I put it in, we turn back onto the highway and listen to *Zombie Lullaby* for another twenty minutes. There are more murders. More rolling heads. And more undead villains, who all say the same thing: "You must die!" Over and over. And over.

We're about three hours from the world's largest truck stop off Iowa 80. (I love the pulled pork sandwiches there, and Daddy likes the vintage trucks at the Trucking Museum.) Which means we have more than enough time to hear the rest of the book. But, sad to say, those villains have gotten pretty boring. And it turns out, Mom was right. It doesn't make any difference which side I choose—the good guys are just as boring as the bad ones. First of all, they keep dying off. And second, they repeat things, just like the zombies do. There's a detective who can't be very smart, because she keeps telling her friends, "I'm close. I know I'm close." And of course, she's right. She *is*

close...to her own grisly end. But I don't have the staying power to see how and when she meets the same fate as the rest of the townspeople.

I press PAUSE and look at Daddy. "Okay if I turn this off?" I ask him. "I can't invest in this." (That's professor talk. It means *There's no one to root for.*)

My father's smile grows from half to full-on. He can't turn to face me because the traffic's too heavy, but it's plain to see, even in profile, how relieved he is. Once again we've settled one of our problems by letting Mom decide things. We do that a lot.

Sometimes I think I remember my mother. In dreams, she holds me with one hand and runs a finger down my newborn nose with the other. I hear the sound of her voice, as if it's happening right now, not eleven years ago: "Don't grow up, Hazel Denise Sampson. Don't you dare grow an inch! I want you just like this forever!"

But Daddy and I talk about her so much and paw over those old photos in the glove compartment so often, I can't be sure which are real memories and which are things I've heard or made up. What I know for sure about Mom is that she couldn't have been much like me: for one thing, she had thick red hair, not mouse brown. (Daddy insists my hair is "skinny blonde," but that's just plain wishful thinking.) In the picture I like best, Mom's wearing a white blouse embroidered with roses, and her hair? It's even brighter than all those flowers put together.

Another thing I'm sure about is that she was smarter than Daddy,

and he's the smartest person ever. Not just because he's got a PhD, but because he's taught me everything I know (except the lyrics to One Dimension songs). He can recite all the last act of just about any Shakespeare play. And he can prove that everything in the universe is growing, including dirt. If *he* says my mother could think and talk circles around him? I believe it.

Her name was Glory, which sounds more elegant than Hazel. And *way* more elegant than Hazmat. That's my trucker handle; drivers almost never use their real names on the road. Ever since Daddy's boss and best friend gave me my nickname, hardly anyone calls me Hazel—unless they're mad at me. "Hazmat" is short for "hazardous materials," so you can probably guess that, in the beginning, at least, Mazen Shields of Shields Trucking didn't think it was a very good idea for Daddy to take me on the road. In fact, he figured it was downright dangerous.

I was only four the day Daddy asked Mazen about driving with me. That was the first time I ever heard the two of them disagree. "Anything could happen, Blake," his friend told Daddy. And trust me, he didn't mean anything *good*. All the big trucking companies feel the same way; they have strict rules about family and ride alongs. But Daddy and Mazen have been friends forever, and Daddy didn't see why a two-truck firm couldn't bend the rules to let his cute but too-small-to-see-out-the-window-without-a-pillow-in-her-car-seat daughter go with him.

Apparently, though, there were lots of reasons. “Hell,” Mazen told Daddy, “if they don’t get you for truancy and endangering a minor, Hazmat here could end up with colic, or crawl under a wheel, or get lost at a truck stop, or—”

“Four-year-olds don’t get colic, Maze.” According to Daddy, Mazen worries way too much. According to Mazen, worrying is in his blood.

Even though they’re like brothers and went to high school and college together, Daddy is white and Mazen is Black. Which means only one of them grew up with what Mazen calls Daily Advisory Warnings. “My mom wouldn’t let me out the door,” he says, “til I recited the three rules: ‘watch your front, watch your back, and never, ever talk back.’”

The day they fought about me, Daddy took a deep breath and slowed down, like he’s always telling me to do. But his voice still got way too loud, and he used his fingers to count all the ways Mazen was wrong: “You can’t be a truant if you’re not old enough to go to school. ” (Pointer finger.) “You’ve taken Shepherd on the road, and my daughter is a lot smarter than a puppy, for God’s sake.” (Middle finger.) “And if Hazel gets lost, I’ll get lost with her.” (Ring finger.)

My father stopped at three fingers, then took them all down to put his arm around me in a bear hug. “We’re a team, right?”

I turned into a pre-K bobblehead—grinning and nodding, grinning and nodding.

I was so busy nodding and smiling, I hardly noticed when Daddy took his arm off me and put it around Mazen. When he pulled him close and told him not to be such a worrywart, that he'd already promised my mom he was going to be both a father and mother.

But Mazen folded his arms and shook his head. "And me?" he asked. "Where does what *I* think figure in all this?"

Daddy started to answer, but Maze held his hand out in front of him like a tight end with a football. "First of all, Hazmat's the closest thing I've ever had to a kid of my own. And if *you're* not going to worry about her, somebody has to.

"Second, in case you've forgotten, it's my company. And third, it's my truck. It's not you that's going to pay the price if some busybody at a weigh-in station wants to know why she's not in kindergarten!"

There were lots more arguments. And sometimes both Daddy and Maze forgot to follow my father's rule about taking a deep breath. In the end, though, Mazen agreed to bid some really short hauls to give his new "team" a chance to prove ourselves. And Daddy agreed that we'd always stay at Mazen's house in between runs.

The day we drove off on our first job, I didn't even know enough to realize how much I was going to miss Mazen and his wife, Serena. I just clutched the bear Serena gave me for the trip and waved at them from my perch in the passenger seat. I'd already taken short rides in Daddy's high-as-a-house truck, and I couldn't imagine anything better than living in it for good.

Seven years later, I still feel the same way. Sure, Leonardo (that's what we named our rig) doesn't seem quite as gigandous now as when I was four. And he's what you'd have to call a senior citizen truck. At over twenty years old, he's missing some bells and whistles, as Daddy calls them. But who really needs a built-in microwave or heated seats? Besides, age has its advantages—trucks as old as Leonardo don't need to use Electronic Logging Devices, which means my paper logs are just fine; not to mention, our truck tends to get lots of compliments. Other truckers stand around and admire the paint job Mazen spent a fortune on and the chrome exhaust stacks. "Great rig," they tell Daddy. Or "A long nose Pete—now there's a classic!"

So I wouldn't trade being homeschooled by my dad in a traveling classroom, or falling asleep in my top bunk under the glow-in-the-dark constellations he's put on the roof of the cab, or meeting old friends at every truck stop, or swinging between coasts like a pendulum—I wouldn't trade all that for anything. Anywhere. Ever.

Which brings me to growing up. I've decided to postpone it indefinitely. Daddy says that when I'm older, we'll quit trucking and buy a house just like Mazen's. He gets all poetic about the barbeque grill in our future backyard, about the four-poster bed in my future bedroom, about all the warm, accepting fellow classmates in the future public school where I'll finally blossom into my "full potential" because of "group learning."

When he goes on these imaginary journeys into tomorrow, my father's voice changes. It gets loud and sounds like the computer

voice that asks you to hold and listen to music while you wait to talk to an actual person. I can tell he's not really that excited about public education or quitting trucking. Or splitting up our father-daughter team. But he's so convinced that I need other kids and teachers in my life—and he works so hard at describing how I'll love every future minute of it—that I haven't found a way to tell him I'm not going anywhere without him.

Instead, I play along. "So, when I'm in junior high," I ask, "can I dye my hair blue?"

"Ask your mother," he says.

I look at the box on the dash. "Mom?" I listen for a minute. "She says sure."

Daddy shakes his head, smiles. "It figures." He says it kind of sadly, kind of proudly. "That's just like her."