

Trucking  
In  
English

An  
Armchair Emigration  
Tale

CAROLYN STEELE

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## **PART 1: FROM WANNABE TO ALMOST-AM**

### IF ALL ELSE FAILS

It was slick, slippery and dark. We were hauling the maximum allowable load, 80,000 lbs gross. The snowploughs had been by clearing surface drifts but snowploughs leave icy droppings. As they passed they mashed the remaining mess of snow, oil and gravel down into a solid layer of scariness.

The road east from Marathon, Ontario was windy, bendy and hilly as well as icy. I bravely managed about 80 kph on the straight runs, a lot less on the hills and bends. I slowed to an irritating crawl on the downhill grades with bends at the bottom. We'd been warned in school, trucks can end up in trouble on slippery hills with bends at the bottom. Apparently they can end up in lakes and/or ravines as well as the vaguer sorts of trouble. Overtly I was being responsible but truthfully I was being pathetic. No, what I was being was terrified.

Other trucks with presumably more experienced and less wimpy drivers flew past us when and where they

could. This wasn't frequent. I switched off the CB, not really wanting to hear what everybody thought of my speed, my mother or my physical attributes. After a couple of hours we were stopped by yet another police cordon... another road closure.

A day's worth of Highway 17 traffic was neatly corralled into the nearest truck stop. Should you wish to consult a map with a magnifying glass you may spot Wawa, Ontario, somewhere north of Lake Superior. It has a truck stop. That is all. As we drank tolerable coffee and ate tolerable chips we heard the gossip, a truck had 'parked in the ditch' in front of us. Behind us the road that had held us up all night—having been closed by the police due to snowdrifts and whiteouts—was closed again, a seventeen truck pile-up with fires and people killed. All of a sudden I didn't mind being the sort of cowardly rookie who drives slowly on ice. Not dying seemed to be sufficient achievement, careful wimps might live to drive this awful road again.

The offending truck was winched out of the ditch eventually and we all trooped off in a grumpy conga line of tired and late freight. I waited for the back of the line, who needs more abuse? The road remained slick. It snowed. The whiteouts came and went with every turn into the wind. In brief moments when the visibility cleared, you could see waves on the lake flash-frozen into little grey mountains.

It took all day and most of the night to round the rest of Lake Superior and emerge from the dreaded weather system that is a Lake Effect Winter Storm. We were exhausted, anxious, and late. But we emerged, which is more than some did.

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Why would a fifty-something, nicely brought-up mother suddenly decide to go trucking? It was a good question and like most good questions it had answers both simple and complex. “It sounds like fun,” just made people who didn’t know me roll their eyes. I did a bit better with “it’s a traditional immigrant job,” and with “well, I can earn more money in a truck than I can with a Master’s degree.” These explanations merely made me sound serious about finding work and supporting my family, not defiantly odd, just a traditional immigrant to Canada indeed. And they were partially true, since emigrating from England I’d struggled to find employment in the things I was actually qualified to do.

My son and I had arrived in Ontario from London posing as entrepreneurs five years earlier. The bed and breakfast I’d bought as my ticket to Canadian citizenship had bitten the dust when I’d realised there was more to running a successful business than looking up *entrepreneur* in the dictionary. I did need a new project but to be honest the trucking thing was more about preferring to play with wheeled toys than do real work. I’d driven ambulances and stretch limos in the past so if I wanted to get bigger and better it was going to have to be something like a truck or a plane.

Trucking school was cheaper, and I’d been eyeing those massive beasts on the roads ever since landing here. I blame my Dad. He wanted a boy. Psychotherapy aside, adding to my list of excuses that it seemed like a great angle for a book helped a bit when explaining to people with no imagination, but not much.

“Ben, have you got a minute?”

“Yes Mum, what’s up?”

“You know how I try not to embarrass you accidentally?”

“Yeah, just on purpose because it’s good for me. I know.”

“Well, I’ve got this idea.”

The seed for my future career as a truck driver had originally been sown back at the B&B. Three lads from England had arrived in search of a year’s accommodation, which we provided. They took over our basement and came and went as they pleased, driving their monsters at odd hours and to exciting-sounding places. We spoiled them with random bacon butties when they turned up, temporarily back from Having Adventures. During that year we shared all the tales...we heard about the people, the trucks, the nightmare border crossings, all those great trips, and we enjoyed it all. We laughed, cried and fumed along with Jim, Owen and Mick on their infrequent stops back ‘home’, agreeing that dispatch were stupid and that Homeland Security were mad but that getting paid to drive over the Golden Gate Bridge made it all worthwhile. And we developed an impression that this job might be fun. (Well, one of us did.) The seed was buried fairly deep back then, a sort of barely acknowledged, *I suppose, if all else fails I can always drive a truck.*

When all else did fail, the idea resurfaced. The B&B was a distant memory and the fifty-something mother found herself empty-nested and wondering what to do next. Why not get paid to see North America? I’d driven for a living before, I’d seen little of Canada and nothing of the States, how hard could it be?

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“I’ve been looking into what to do now you’re away at uni most of the year.”

“Umm hmm.” He gets that look on his face.

“I thought I might learn to drive a truck.” The relief is visible.

“Is that all?”

“You don’t think it’s nuts?”

“Well, yes, obviously it’s nuts.”

With the familial seal of approval, nuts enough to be interesting but not so nuts as to be embarrassing, I allowed the seed to see the light of day elsewhere. To begin with I introduced it into conversations as a joke, “If all else fails I can always drive a truck (ho, ho).” It was, of course, more of a test than a joke. People who knew me well would eye me strangely, give it a moment’s thought and respond, “I wouldn’t put it past you (ho, ho).” Frequently these were the same people on whom I had tested out the whole mad idea of moving to Canada and buying a B&B in the first place. As a joke of course.

All of a sudden I was bumping into people from the freight transport industry, I probably had been before then but you know how you suddenly start noticing things when they can serve a purpose. Specific questions began to leave my head via my mouth involuntarily. Which were the best schools? How long was the course? What would it cost? What could you earn? How much work was there out there? Did trucking companies employ women?

It didn’t help the growing inevitability when my early questioning unearthed the coincidence that the finest trucking school in town belonged to my old neighbours from the B&B. We’d connected briefly when I’d toured the neighbourhood with bottles of wine to apologise after

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a particularly noisy pool party but the subject of trucks hadn't cropped up back then. It did now and I got most of my trucking answers from people who knew me and those answers were worryingly positive. Ours, two months, not a lot, lots, lots and yes. They appeared mildly surprised when I asked about the women thing, apparently it's the 21st century and that trail has already been blazed.

I was surprised but encouraged. The London Ambulance Service had taken some persuading to employ me and my fellow lady paramedics in the very early '80s, we had blazed the trails back then in heroic manner. We'd considered our task complete when women began to appear driving ambulances on TV shows and we'd subsequently reserved the right to tell female rookies how lucky they were we'd fought their battles for them. Apparently we hadn't been unique.

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My neighbours' training school supplied me with a list of the companies they placed rookies with, so that I could call for myself and ask about the female thing. They told me how one qualified for the course; clean driving abstract and police check, medical check-up and mechanical aptitude test. With the presence of mind not to exclaim *mechanical aptitude test* out loud I thanked them prettily and toddled off to continue my research. I allowed the nagging sense that I might have underestimated the task ahead to bury itself under a veneer of bravery and panache.

I called a couple of the companies on their list of employers and left voice messages for recruiters asking about prospects for women on the road. One company

called back within hours and I had a cozy chat with a lady called Gwen. She was amused, apparently my concerns really did date back to the dark ages. She also confirmed, independently, that I had chosen the best school. We discussed my background...“Call me when you have your licence,” she cooed, “we’ll talk some more.”

Thus encouraged that paid work might actually exist, I went on-line to Google *mechanical aptitude tests*. Memories of ambulance days flooded back. The aptitude test back then had been to watch someone strip down and reassemble an Entonox delivery kit and repeat the procedure within a time limit. I had visions of being asked to uncouple a rig (or whatever it is they call whatever it is they do) and could see my career on the open road rapidly disappearing into the black hole in my brain labelled *pipe dreams*.

The internet was fairly reassuring though. I found a site which allowed you to download a bookful of sample papers complete with answers and explanations for the princely sum of \$19. The book explained that many occupations now use mechanical aptitude tests to check that you are trainable in practical pursuits and that practice could make all the difference.

I cleared a work station on the dining room table, bought myself a toy truck as a visual aid and settled down to do my homework. The questions fell into several categories of IQ type thingy. I was well versed in most of them—spotting series and doing sums, finding the odd one out from loads of nonsensical diagrams—I have always liked that sort of thing, but I did appreciate the crash course in ‘O’ Level physics.

In no time I was relearning long-forgotten rules for levers, gears and electrical circuitry. The sample tests

seemed relatively challenging though. They were aimed at people hoping to be taken on by armed forces to do very clever technical stuff and, not being one of those, I sometimes didn't manage the recommended time limits. I comforted myself with the thought that I was hoping to drive a truck not design a helicopter so presumably my impending test would have to be a bit easier than these.

With the crash revision course in physics under my belt, and bits of paper confirming that I had a clean criminal record and nothing untoward on my driving licence, I make an appointment to be tested mechanically.

The pre-test interview was fairly straightforward. Have I driven big stuff before? (Is an ambulance big? I had thought so but maybe not in comparison to things with many axles.) Have I used a manual gearbox before? (I'm English, that's what we drive.) Am I beholden to alcohol or drugs? (Does an occasional gin and tonic count? See previous question, I'm English, that's what we do.) Have I worked away from home overnight before? (Does shift work count?) Will the family miss me? (Son doesn't care but I'll ask the cat.) The chap who asked all the questions had adopted an almost avuncular smile. When we began to muse about arrangements I might make for feeding the aforementioned cat I had the scintilla of a suspicion I might be being humoured. But very nicely, this is Canada after all.

And then the test. It would take thirty minutes and did I have any questions? I didn't and he left the room, hopefully before my face fell as I opened the booklet. There were no IQ-type questions at all, just a lot of little pictures of chaps with shovels and buckets and things. Some pictures of trains and dams and drinking straws.

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Which is the easiest to push?

Which is the strongest setup?

Which chap will lift the heavier weight?

Which diagram shows what will happen?

Where is the least bumpy seat on a school bus?

The book had been much used and the diagrams were worn, faint and difficult to interpret. Some of the levers and gears and see-saws were things I'd just revised but much of the rest of it was real life. What about that bus? I had to think back an awfully long way. When I was a kid we'd sit at the back for bumpiness, and I thought I'd heard that people who are travelsick avoid being over the wheels, so which is it? A lot of the questions sort of related to hydraulics, which made sense, but there had been none of that on my online papers. The real 'O' level physics was 35 years behind me. Something to do with the size of the pipe affecting the pressure in some sort of ratio, but what exactly?

These questions, the ones that related to life, were taking too long to answer. I was the wrong side of middle age and there was a lot of life to trawl through. What shape made the strongest dam? I could tell you from ambulance days what shape of crowd barrier would crush the fewest teenyboppers...but was spreading out the crush points for people good or bad for water? And the second picture of a train crash meant that I must have got the previous one wrong. I dashed back miserably to the earlier question featuring a little train on a bend, confirming that I'd visualised it backwards.

I got the point of the test. This sort of mechanical aptitude made much more sense for the task ahead than the abstract stuff I had played with, and was a great deal

fairer for people without a poncey education, but I had to make a few guesses. That \$19 had been a waste of money, the toy truck, ditto. Who the hell did I think I was? “Oh yes, I’ve decided to be a truck driver you know, because I’m the sort of intrepid, brilliant woman who can do anything she puts her mind to.” Silly cow.

The nice chap took my paper away and returned a few minutes later, grinning at the number of Kleenex I had managed to shred during the interregnum. He declared 89% more than ok for aptitude of the mechanical variety, who’d have thought I knew so much about shovels and train wrecks?

Instead of learning from this experience that I wasn’t temperamentally suited to trucking, I was sufficiently dazzled by the idea of being eligible for trucking school that I sat and listened to the routine. Medical, registration with the school, receipt of a pile of textbooks, taking the Ontario Transport Ministry’s A class licence knowledge test, classroom. Then truck. Apparently one needed to pass the Ministry theory test before they would let one onto the course so the absorption and revision of unladylike facts and figures had only just begun, as had the conveyor belt that is always so easy to step onto and so difficult to get off.

The doc pronounced me fit enough for purpose therefore, a deposit to the school and some signatures later, I found myself the proud owner of three text books to be read in specific order within the next three weeks. I placed them proudly on the dining table next to the toy truck and invited people over for coffee, so they could notice them.