

# Over the Long Haul

...

*Martha Soukup*

Sometimes I think I've been in this truck forever, but of course that's not so. I just have to look at my license card if I want the proof:

"Shawana Mooney," it says, and right next to that the day I got the card, two years ago. Two weeks after little Cilehe was born, which makes it easy to remember her birthday.

That name "Shawana" makes me think sometimes my daddy was a guy named Shawn Parker. My mama sure cried when he got shot dead when I was eight, but she wouldn't say he was my daddy. She just said he was no good and ran drugs and then she cried some more. Mooney, of course, that's my mama's name and her mama's, and it was my great-grandma's too. Also my great-grandpa's. They were married.

Then the card's got my picture, which looks terrible with my eyes all stary the way the camera caught them, but I kind of like the way I had my hair done then, with all those little braids my grandma put in.

I must look awful now. I look at myself in the big side mirror when I fix up my makeup, but I don't really look hard at the whole effect, if you know what I mean. When Tomi gets a little bigger— he's barely four now—maybe I can teach him to fix my hair.

Or maybe we'll get out of this truck.

I think about that a lot, especially when Cilehe gets cranky and yells. Which isn't fair to her of course because what two-year-old wants to grow up in the cab of a truck, six feet wide and six feet deep? Sure, she's got "Sesame Street" like I did—and a lot of other much more boring TV, like it or not—but I could go outside besides, even if my grandma was always warning me about gangs. Cilehe's the kind of baby who needs to move around and tire herself out, which is pretty hard here.

I know exactly how she feels.

But it's none of her doing. I tell myself that. I got her by my own self—well, I had help, but it isn't her fault her daddy isn't in a truck too. They put the welfare parents who actually are raising the kids in the trucks. Now, do you know any guy who's going to take them? Nope. Both their daddies were long gone before that happened.

One truck stop looks a lot like another. I was kind of dozing behind the wheel when it took a big pull right and the truck went on to an exit. I tried to guess where we were—I thought maybe Nebraska. Sure was flat as hell out there.

Cilehe started kicking up a fit. She always acts like the last couple minutes before we stop is a couple of hours, and screaming will make the truck go faster. The only thing that could make the truck go faster is if I hit MANUAL OVERRIDE and drove it myself, and I'd better have a damn good reason for that or it's big trouble. She was screaming for the potty. She just started with that, and she doesn't like the portapotty in the cab. Me neither. I don't care what they say, the thing smells.

Got her in before she messed up her panties, Tomi following quiet as a mouse. He's not quite big enough to send into the boys' room alone yet. Then she didn't want to wash her hands, and when I made her, she got her hands and face and hair and T-shirt and the floor all wet, and glared up at me like I did it. She stomped out of the bathroom with her sneakers going squish, squish, squish.

I looked in to see if I knew any of the drivers. Kimberlea and Avis were both there, still going along the same route I was. I met Avis for the first time in Minneapolis on this run. Kimberlea I met soon after I started. The women on the road tell me you can go forever between seeing someone twice, so that was lucky. As long as we kept going along the same route, taking our full breaks—who wouldn't take her full break?—so they'd be the same length, we'd keep meeting up. Kimberlea is older than my mama, maybe forty, and she used to do keypunching in the very last office that still used it, years and years after everyone else stopped, until the business was sold and they retired the old-time system. Her kids are twelve and eight, and she was even married when she had them.

Avis was having trouble with her boy. Her one-year-old twins were in the big playpen in the middle of the dining room, the boy screaming his head off. I looked at Cilehe, but she just stared at the kid with big round eyes, didn't copy him. The baby wailed, while Avis drank Coke with her face turned away from him, her eyebrows down and her mouth real tight,

trying to act like the baby wasn't there.

"But I don't know if I want green or blue," she was saying to Kimberlea.

Kimberlea sighed. "Girl, what do you need with neon fingernails?" I put Cilehe in the pen, away from Avis's boy, and let Tomi sit next to me.

"Just because I'm stuck in a truck all day doesn't mean I can't look good!" Avis is a couple years younger than me, maybe seventeen.

"That sort of thing costs money. You don't get that much to save."

"So what else do I have to spend it on?"

"You can save it," Kimberlea said stubbornly.

"Right, and maybe in twelve years when my babies are teenagers and they let me out, I'll have a couple hundred bucks!" Avis took a long drink of her Coke. Kimberlea and I said hi. "So why not order the implant kit and have something now?"

"Couple hundred dollars is better than nothing. And you could save more than that."

"On what the government gives us?" Avis snorted and peeled open a Snickers.

"I save six dollars a week," Kimberlea said.

"You told us," Avis said.

Last stop, Kimberlea'd laid out her whole plan over breakfast. She's studying for her accounting license. Accounting's just a matter of using spreadsheets and stuff, she said, but they still make you study for it. The course work costs, and then you have to get a license, which is a lot of money even before the bribes. She saves every penny. Doesn't even use up her food vouchers; sells the leftovers back to the government for half value, or sometimes to other truckers for two thirds. Her plate had scraps of meat loaf and carrots. Not even Jell-O for dessert. She stays husky just the same.

"What the fuck you want an accounting license for anyway?" Avis asked. "It's just minimum wage. Your oldest is thirteen next year, so you get out one way or another." Trucking's also a labor option for mothers with just one preteenager, but I've only seen a couple women who chose it when they didn't have to. They'd put her on some other workfare labor. Maybe sidewalk cleaning. That's what I did, five hours a day, before Cilehe. I used to hate it, but it's better than trucking.

Kimberlea took her paper napkin off her lap, folded it neatly, and laid it on her tray. "I don't like being on welfare if I can work," she said. "Not this

workfare joke—a real job. I always worked until they took my job away. That’s the way I know.”

The boy was screaming so loud now even Avis couldn’t ignore it any longer. “Shit,” she said. She stuffed the rest of the Snickers into her mouth and went to get him.

Kimberlea and I talked for a couple minutes until her watch started beeping. “Back to the road,” she said. She gathered up her two kids, who had been reading quietly at another table—don’t know how she saves six bucks a week, if she buys them books—and left.

Avis came back. “Damn kid needed a new diaper,” she said. “Where’s old Kim Burly?”

“Her break was up.”

“Stuck-up bitch.” She wiggled her fingers in my face. “So do you think green or blue?”

Tomi tugged my arm and pointed. I was set to ignore him, but the room had gone quiet. I looked up. There was a man in the dining room.

Maybe if you don’t truck, you don’t know how strange that was. When I was little, I guess most truckers were guys. Then they came up with the remote-driving system, one guy in his living room controlling a dozen trucks. The unions kicked a fuss about that, of course, so everyone yelled at each other until they came up with a couple solutions: early retirement with heaps of compensation for the old truckers—lot of younger guys took that and went into other work— and retraining the truckers that passed the tests to be controllers at a big fat salary. At the same time, they passed a law that there had to be a driver in each truck. For manual override in emergencies, like that was going to happen. But nobody trusts computers and leastways unions.

Then came the Welfare Labor Act, the workfare act. Bound to happen, they put us in the trucks. It’s boring. It doesn’t pay shit—the controllers get the real money. We all know why they put us with two kids in the trucks. It’s like, you get yourself one kid, they put you cleaning sidewalks or something and thinking on what happens if you get another one. You get another one anyway, and bam! into a truck. So now you’re on the road all the time, only get out at a truck stop and see other drivers and they’re all women too. A third kid is too many to live in a truck cab, so you’d get out, but how’re you going to get a third one? Locking you in a convent couldn’t work any better.

What they say is truck cabs are perfect classrooms, educational TV the

kids (and their moms) can't get away from. Getting away from bad influences. Breaking the cycle of poverty.

What it's *about* is punishing us, keeping us away from that nasty stuff that got us here. We all know it. These are the same people who got abortion made illegal, and whittled down sex ed next to nothing. (Though from what my mama told me once before she moved on, people hardly used birth control even when they had teachers telling them about it.) They're punishing us, all right.

I never saw a guy trucking. As far as I ever knew, they didn't even *let* guys choose trucking.

Avis was staring. "Jesus, it's a man!" she whispered.

"Real good," I said. "You remember what they look like."

Maybe I hadn't, though. Oh, he was tall and he was fine. White, like Cilehe's daddy, but dark tan skin. Maybe Latin. His hair came down in a braid over one shoulder, thick and brown and shiny. Cheekbones cut high like a TV Indian's. He had tight old jeans on. The way they hugged his hips close you could imagine doing yourself.

Man, it had been too long since I'd seen a guy.

He walked over to an empty table across the room and a dozen pairs of eyes followed him. Nobody said a word.

One skinny girl with a baby on her hip went over and stared down at him. "Truckers only in this room," she said in a mean voice.

That broke the silence. Everyone started up with catcalls, hisses, and "Who *cares?*" The girl glared back at all of us. Some of them, when they get put in the trucks, actually buy the crap about our Evil Ways and get worse than any taxpayer.

The guy just smiled up at her so nice your toes curled. "You're right," he said. His voice was like caramel candy. He pulled out his trucker's card.

The girl's lips went white. She grabbed the kid up in her arm, pulled another off her chair, and left the room.

"This is mine," Avis said, to me or maybe just to the universe.

"What are you talking about?" Her eyes looked like a cat's fixing to go after a mouse. Squintier than a cat's, though, in her pasty pimply face. No way a man so fine-looking would go for her.

Not that *I* was after him.

"Seventeen months," Avis said. No need to ask seventeen months since

what.

I fluffed my hair up around my forehead. I knew it looked like hell.

Avis was already moving, plowing through a crowd of women all trying to look like they had some casual reason for happening to go over by that particular table at that particular time. It sure wasn't worth it to join the mob.

"Look after your sister," I told Tomi. I put him in the pen with the other kids. "I'll be back in five minutes. Need some fresh air."

"Me too, Mama?" he asked, but he's a good kid. He didn't complain. I didn't want fresh air, I wanted to get out of the room so my eyes wouldn't be all over that guy. Something got you in this fix, I told myself. You think you'd learn someday.

Even the place outside for truckers to walk around is separate from the place car drivers go to let their poodles piddle. Same sky, though, high and gray, the wind whipping around pretty good. I took a deep breath of windy air. I told myself I wasn't a kid anymore, fourteen and stupid like when Tomi's daddy got him on me. When that didn't work, I tried telling myself he had a whole truck stop full of girls to pick from. When that didn't work, I looked at my watch and told myself I only had another ten minutes in my break, and odds were this guy wasn't going the same way anyway.

I talked to myself until I had me just about convinced. "Nice day," he said.

I didn't jump. I was great. "Sure, if you hate sun and like smog."

"Somebody must," he said, "or you wouldn't be outside in it."

I turned then. "Oh, I just get tired of girl talk all the time," I said.

"I wouldn't know," he said. The wind was strong enough to flop his braid around. Some of his hair was loose and blowing over his forehead. His eyes were the clearest, lightest brown I'd ever seen. "The women always seem to stop talking when I come in."

"Yeah, well, they're easily impressed." I couldn't understand why he was out here with me. Couldn't understand why I was saying bitchy things to him either.

"But not you, I guess," he said.

"I been around some."

"I can tell you're a woman of experience."

Was he laughing at me? He didn't look like it. I grunted in a worldly sort

of way.

“Cal,” he said, sticking his hand out. After a moment I realized it was his name.

“Shawana,” I said. Took his hand. Right when I did, I knew I never should have. Something about man flesh just feels different, and the skin of my hand, I realized, had been starved for the taste of it.

The rest of my skin started up a clamor.

He was still holding on to my hand, so I pulled it back. I tried to think of something regular to say. “Don’t see a lot of guys trucking,” I said. Oh, smooth. Real smooth.

“Well, you’ve seen me,” he said.

“Don’t you have to have kids to get a trucking license?”

“Yes.”

I couldn’t think of anything to say to that—or too many things: You got kids? How come you have them and not their mamas? Where are they—the mamas and especially the kids? What are you doing out here?

Maybe he read my mind a little. “The baby’s in his crib in the truck. I didn’t want to wake him.”

“Just one baby?”

Cal nodded—the braid went swish, swish.

“How come you’re trucking?” Maybe it was rude to ask, but I could have said, Why isn’t his mama stuck with him like the usual course of events?—which would’ve been ruder.

He looked away, which showed off his sharp cheekbones against the gray sky just about perfect. “I needed time to be alone. To think.”

“Well, you sure got that,” I said. I couldn’t not ask any longer. “I didn’t think they let guys truck. I thought it was a mother’s job.”

He rubbed his face in his hands and the air seemed to get even darker. “She—Jess’s mother died. When he was born.”

Oh, shit. “Jesus, I’m sorry, I didn’t mean—”

He looked back at me and tried to smile. “That’s okay. You couldn’t know.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Yeah. Well, that’s the one exception to the guideline that unwed welfare mothers get all the trucks. If the mother’s dead, they let the father

do it.” His mouth quirked with no smile to it. “After all, their big argument is that the truck’s the ideal classroom, so they can’t say no. It’s for the good of the lad, right?”

I felt bad about my nosiness. The silence stretched out. “Um, you miss her?”

“Well, it’s getting better. I don’t think she was going to marry me anyway.”

“You were *engaged*?”

He shook his head. “But I thought I could get her to marry me after—” He stopped and looked straight up at the sky, blinking hard.

I grabbed his hand, saying some nonsense like I do when Tomi’s crying. Here I’d just been thinking about this guy as a hot body. Then I was holding him and still saying soothing nonsense things.

My watch beeped. He pulled back.

“I gotta be going.”

“I’m sorry. Usually I want to be alone, but sometimes it’s hard —and in the truck stops there’s always such a crowd—”

“It’s okay,” I said. “I hope things are better.”

“Which way are you going?” he asked suddenly.

“How do I know? It’s been west on 80, if that’s any help. I think I may be going to Salt Lake. I’ve done that route once or twice.”

“Maybe we’ll see each other again along the route.”

My face got warm. “There’s no way to know that.”

He smiled an I-know-things-you-don’t smile. “I have ways of being more certain.”

The watch beeped again. “Well—bye, Cal.”

“Until we meet again,” he said.

Cilehe was in a real bad mood from being left alone. Tomi was trying to make her laugh, meowing like a cat and rubbing against her feet. Don’t know where he ever saw a cat. Maybe on “Sesame Street.” My watch was beeping steady now: if I didn’t get into the truck in a big hurry, I’d lose all my discretionary money for a week. I helped Tomi out of the pen, yanked Cilehe up by the armpit, and ran to the parking lot.

Cal was leaning against a big black truck like I’d never seen. He looked at us as we scrambled up into the cab. I pushed the button to say we were



ready to go. The truck lurched and squealed out of the lot and onto the highway.

It was fractions on the TV—one half, one third, one quarter— over and over and over and over again. Tomi watched for a while. Cilehe just scowled and rocked back and forth. Usually I pick her up when she gets like that. But as long as she wasn't making noise, I had other things to think on.

Out in the walking area, holding Cal, I was just trying to make him feel better. Now it was over, I was noticing all the ways he felt to me. His thick braid of hair squeezed between our chests. His soft flannel shirt and the hard muscles underneath it. The man smell. The little raspy sound when his tight jeans rubbed on mine—

Another twenty minutes and there's no telling what might have happened.

But the road wore on and the fluttery feeling began to die away. The guy had acted like he had reason to think we'd be at the same truck stop down the road, but that was about as likely as running into a whole different guy would be. If only I'd run into him earlier— nearer the beginning of the hour lunch break. Next break would only be twenty minutes, to gas up the truck and grab a quick bite, and he was running more than twenty minutes behind me on the road even if he did go the same direction and stop at the same stop.

Unless he decided to cut his lunch short and get right back on the road—

I began to have another thought I maybe wasn't proud of, a thought about getting us out of the truck.

We stayed on 80 like I'd guessed, which means the long way across Nebraska, not the best scenery for distracting the brain. Corn, wheat—it all just looks green at a distance. About twenty thousand fractions later, the truck pulled itself off.

I looked for the strange black truck, but of course it wasn't there. I'd've seen him pass me on the road. I gassed up, parked, and took the kids into the stop.

Kimberlea wasn't there. Avis was. Didn't really know anyone else, so I sat next to her again.

“That guy left early,” she complained.

“Maybe he had to go check on his kid,” I said.

“How do you know he has a kid?”

“He’s gotta have one or he wouldn’t be trucking,” I said. “If he didn’t bring it in, it must’ve been in its crib.”

“Not much of a parent, if he leaves his lad alone in his truck,” Avis said. I hadn’t even thought about that.

“It was probably sleeping, and he didn’t want to wake it,” I said.

“Why you want to defend him?” she asked.

I shrugged. “No reason. Just seemed to make sense.”

“I don’t care if he’s a lousy parent or Nelly Nurture,” she said. (Nelly Nurture is the teenage star of a show on public TV who tells you how to eat when you’re pregnant and how to take care of your babies.) “I just care if his parts are all in working order.”

Then who should walk in but Cal himself, which Avis saw before I did. “And it looks like a great time to find out!” She jumped up. I couldn’t stand to look at the way she embarrassed herself. I wondered at him being right when he said we’d meet again down the road.

“Is this seat taken?” He’d come over to the table, Avis hovering behind him looking mad. More girls were beginning to gather.

“I don’t think so.”

He sat. “What do you know about teething pain?”

“Well, if you rub his gums it helps. And they sell this stuff in little tubes that numbs them up.”

“Could you show me?”

So I took him over to the counter and showed him. He pulled out some vouchers to pay for it. I noticed he had a fat wad of them.

“Will you show me how to use it?”

I told Tomi to look after his baby sister again, and Cal and I went out to the lot, all those female eyes at our backs. There was his truck, black and somehow heavy looking, without the regular Mack or Peterbilt symbols on it.

“Let’s stop at your truck first—I have something I’d like to do.”

I unlocked it. He opened the door and got in, reaching down his hand to help me up. Cool, firm hand.

First thing he did was fold down the playpen’s walls. The pen is big enough to sleep two big kids, and my mattress behind it is big enough to

sleep one fat woman. (I'm not fat.) Fold down the walls, and most of the cab is mattress.

“What are you doing?” I asked, though I thought I knew.

“You'll see,” he said. On the right wall of the cab, where it had been covered up by the playpen's wall, there was a little panel. You almost couldn't see it even looking straight at it. The place he pushed to make it pop open didn't look any different from the rest of the wall. Inside was a number display, what they call liquid crystal, and a whole lot of tiny little switches. He started messing with them.

“What are you doing?” I asked again.

“Just a second.” He messed around some more, closed up the panel, and smiled at me. “Now your central controller's computer thinks you're still on the road and haven't even gotten here yet. Then it'll register you coming here and starting your break in forty minutes. You've got an hour before you have to get going again.”

“How can you do that?”

“I've got a few skills.”

“If you can do that kind of thing, why are you driving a truck? You could be making real money.”

There was a glitter in Cal's eye. He bowed his head down low and said some woman's name—Ellen or something, it was hard to hear. I went over and held his head up against my chest, with his braid snaked over the crook of my arm. Murmured nonsense again. His arms came up around my back and my hands went down behind his jeans.

We used every last inch of that mattress space.

“Oh Christ,” I said later, “my babies have been in the stop all this time.”

“They'll be okay,” he said.

I put the rubber band back on his braid. I'd been playing with it. “They are never alone this long. And what about Jess?” He looked at me. “You said he had teething pain.”

“Oh—my God, you're right. I'd better get to him.” He started pulling his pants on.

“Do you want me to help show you how to use the medicine?”

“No, that's okay. I'm sure I can figure it out.”

“It's no trouble—”

“The instructions are on the tube, right? You go get your kids.” He looked at his watch. “You’ve got ten more minutes.”

Ten minutes left! I hadn’t been stopped this long in two years.

I left him off at his truck and he kissed me right out in public. “See you next stop,” he said.

I hadn’t even thought of seeing him again. On the trucking routes, he could have any action he wanted. But if I was his first since Ellen or Helen or whoever, maybe it actually meant something to him.

I felt a little bad about that.

Tomi was sitting in the big pen, holding Cilehe and crying. Not screaming or anything—his face was wet and he was hiccupping.

When I came in, I could see him trying to look brave. He also looked surprised—like he thought I was dead and was amazed to see me. “C’mon, guys,” I said. When we got out, the big black truck was gone.

I had to raise the playpen walls, which took a while since I’d never had them down before. Finally I found the catch that did it. My watch beeped, I pressed the button, and we started off.

Nebraska’s a wide state. We probably had another whole stretch of it. At some point I noticed my watch had changed time an hour earlier—Mountain Time Zone. That’s one way to measure progress: time travel. Another is to measure the money you save, but unless you’re Kimberlea, that’s pointless. Just as pointless to measure by the calendar, since Friday’s just like Wednesday’s just like Sunday, and night is like day but dark and not as many stops.

Another is to measure the seasons go by. But you spend some time driving in the South where it’s warmer in winter than North Dakota is some summers. And you spend so little time outside that the weather might as well be television, except for rainstorms crashing against the cab’s roof. The babies never get used to that.

Or you can measure the seasons of your own body. Now that means something, because I’ve always been as regular as clockwork.

For example, I knew it was just about ten days before my next period.

The kids were fussy. Even Tomi. He wanted me to hold him and he wouldn’t let me let go. Cilehe screamed. After an hour I blew up.

“If you don’t shut up, I’ll drive off without you next time!”

Cilehe screamed louder. Tomi’s eyes went round and he bit his lips in like he was afraid a word would come out by itself if he didn’t hold it back,

and tears came down his face like crazy.

“Oh, Jesus, I’m sorry. Mama’d never do that. Mama’d never do that.” If he’d been bigger, I’d have told him how much trouble I’d be in at the next checkpoint if I didn’t have the kids registered to me. Truck’s not much, but jail’s worse. Or I might have tried to explain I love my babies and everything I was doing was for them as much as me.

Instead I rocked him until he fell asleep in my lap, while Cilehe cried herself out.

When the truck pulled over, the black truck was there. We parked, I jumped out, and Cal was waiting. “Got something for you,” he said to Tomi, and from behind his back he pulled out a big bag of M&Ms. “Can you share those with your little sister?”

I shot him a look. It was an awful lot of candy. But Tomi was so excited I could hardly take it away from him. Cal took Tomi’s other hand and we all went into the stop.

“Why don’t we grab a couple of burgers and eat in your truck?” Cal said.

“Sure,” I explained to Tomi that Mama’d be gone for a while but was coming back. “Be brave for Cilehe,” I said.

Cal messed with those switches again while I wolfed down my cheeseburger. You can get really horny again in just a few hours, especially when it’s been almost three years since the time before.

He lay with his head on my stomach. “You’ve really got nice kids,” he said.

“Thanks.”

“Do they look like their fathers?”

“Actually, I think they favor me more. Too bad for them.”

“I don’t have any complaints,” he said quietly, drawing his hand along the bottom of my jaw.

I felt I was blushing, though I’m a little dark for that. “Go on.”

“Your boy’s a real little man. What’s his name again?”

“Tomi.”

“Tomi, right. I hope Jess grows up like that.”

“I’m sure he will.”

“Do your kids get along well?”

“Sure. Tomi’s a great big brother. Kids can get to feel responsible for

each other sometimes.”

“Do you think so?”

I laughed. “When they aren’t trying to kill each other. But I’m glad they have each other. I never had any sisters or brothers. My mama got some kind of infection in her tubes that stopped her from having more babies. I’m sorry about that sometimes.”

“But you had friends, other kids you grew up with.”

“Yeah.”

He looked away. “Jess will never have a sister. He’s never spent more than an hour in the company of the same children.”

I brushed back the little pieces of hair around his forehead with my fingers. “I’m sorry.”

“There’s nothing you can do about it.” Then he looked straight up at me, his light brown eyes real intense. “Except maybe there is.”

“What do you mean?”

“Loan me one of your kids.”

“What?”

He pulled himself up out of my lap and took my shoulders. “Let one of your kids ride in my truck for a leg or two. To play with Jess. To get to know him, and be a big brother or sister to him.”

I shook his hands off. “That’s crazy, Cal! You can’t take off with my baby. I might never see you again!”

He patted his hand on the little hidden panel. “I told you we’d see each other again before, and how did it turn out?”

“But how do you know we’ll even be staying on the same route?”

“Do you think I could make those changes if I didn’t have access to your central controller’s data through the remote unit?”

I guessed not. Still— “What if there’s a checkpoint, and I have one kid too few and you have one too many? We’d both be arrested, and I don’t think they’ll accept your asking me so nicely as a good excuse.”

“Same source of information,” he said. “There’s no checkpoint on this route until Utah.”

All that from a little panel I hadn’t even known was there. “If you can do that sort of stuff,” I said, “why aren’t you—?”

He put a finger over my lips. “I know I seem complicated,” he said. “But

just look at me and you'll see how simple I really am. I thought I needed time alone to help me get over—" He stopped and looked away, then he smiled at me. "Now I know I was right." He swapped his own lips for his finger. After a while he leaned back and said, "As a favor to me?"

"Or as a favor to Jess. You're a mother. You know what children need. If you help him out, you'll be being the mother he never had."

This was all coming so fast. My first plan began to be pushed away by a whole different Plan B. Which wasn't a bad plan at all, since it could supply everyone's needs and make all of us happy. Another three hours' drive from now, when I saw how things were going, I'd have a pretty good idea how likely Plan B was.

"All right," I said. "For Jess's sake."

I thought the point of M&Ms was not to get chocolate all over your face. Cal took a paper napkin and wiped off Cilehe's mouth, gentle and careful, and rubbed his hand through her hair just like a daddy should.

Tomi stared up at him. I realized for the first time he'd never seen a man that close before.

"Which one?" Cal asked.

I considered. "Tomi looks scared of you. How about Cilehe?"

"That's fine." He picked her up. "You're coming with me, pretty lady."

She started screaming.

"Um—I'm sorry—she's usually not like that." Well, sometimes she'll go a whole day without screaming much. I took her from him and rocked her until she shut it down. I carried her outside to the big black truck.

"I'll take her from here," Cal said, reaching for my baby.

I suddenly didn't much like the looks of that black truck. "Maybe it's not such a good idea," I said,

"Shawana," he said. He leaned forward and kissed me; while kissing me, he took Cilehe from my arms, smooth as silk. "We'll just try it for this leg. If she's unhappy, she goes straight back with you. Maybe your little boy would like to ride in such a big truck next time, huh?" He said that to Tomi, who stared up at him. "Or you might like to have Jess, later," he said to me. "I'd like you to get to know him."

"I'd like that too," I said.

He smiled. He kissed me again, and he ruffled Tomi's hair with the hand that wasn't holding Cilehe. "See you in a few hours," he said, opened his

door, and swung the two of them up into the cab so fast I never got more than a glimpse of it, big and dark like the truck's outside, before the door shut. But then he rolled down the window.

"You're a really special lady, did you know?" he said.

The black truck pulled away.

Tomi started to cry.

"Don't," I said to him, "c'mon, don't cry." We went back to the truck, me pulling and pulling on Tomi's arm, him not wanting to move. "Don't cry, it's okay, everything's wonderful, listen to Mama."

After Nebraska is Colorado, which at least isn't flat all the way through. Tomi usually loves hills and mountains, going up and down.

Cilehe hates having her ears pop, hates it when they won't pop. I had to keep reminding myself I didn't have to worry about it.

"Where's Cee, Mama? Where's Cee?"

"Just ahead of us, baby. A couple miles ahead. It's okay, baby."

"Where's Cee?" he insisted. I thought his sister could get on my nerves!

"She's fine, Tomi. Watch the TV."

"Where's Cee?"

Helping us get out of this truck, baby. Up with a man who wants a mother for his son, comfort for his bed, and once he has them won't have any reason to stay in these rolling jail cells. A man who knows enough about computers to get a job that buys stereos and big TVs with channels you can change and nice haircuts that look pretty. A man who's actually wanted to get married, and can want to again.

A man we can all live with just fine, if it means getting out of this truck.

Plan B.

I decided it was some sugar-reaction thing making Tomi so cranky and it would wear down. He did get quiet after a while, after I stopped trying to answer his questions.

It seemed like the longest stretch we'd ever driven. I spent it trying out all the different ways Plan B could work. Ways to become a permanent part of Cal's life. To get out of the truck. I'd never even begun to guess what it's like in it. Some drivers even have told me they'd thought it would be a great way to get away from their mamas nagging on them all the time. Me, I didn't want to risk an illegal abortion. Some nasty nights I've wondered if I did the right thing.



Then I began to worry if I'd done the right thing having Cilehe ride with Cal. She's the cranky one. If she was kicking a shitfit, and if his Jess wasn't the cranky type so he wasn't used to it, he might get a bad impression of me as a mother. It's not my fault she's cranky. Every baby's different. But he might not know that.

When the truck started to pull over, it seemed like three hours. Hell, it seemed like six. I wanted to find out how it had gone, make a little nice with Cal, and let Tomi see his sister so he'd stop pestering me.

It wasn't until we were almost there I saw it wasn't a truck stop. It was a checkpoint.

There wasn't supposed to be one until Utah! Cal said we were perfectly safe swapping babies until then. Cal was right about everything else—how could he have screwed this up?

There was a knock on the window. "Out of the truck, lady."

"What's this all about?" I called, thinking hard.

"Just come out of the truck, and there won't be any trouble."

There were cops out there, besides the welfare worker who usually just checks your license, makes sure you are who you say you are and your babies are okay. There were cops out there, and they had guns.

"Why do you want to have guns on me?" I called, just to use up some time and think some more.

"Come on out of the truck," the first cop repeated, but another one said, "Child abandonment's a serious charge, lady."

Oh Christ, yes, it is. Worst thing they can catch us at aside from welfare fraud.

"I wouldn't abandon my babies!"

"Maybe so," said the second cop, "but that's not the tip we got from the trucker who just came through."

"She was lying."

"Don't think *he* was." The cop elbowed his friend and said, "Look at her face. She knows who we're talking about."

The other one sniggered. "You can learn a lot about a girl's secrets when you get a piece of her. Maybe we should start an undercover program! I'd volunteer."

I felt like I'd been hit, but I knew I had to stay cool. "Let me get out and I'll explain."

“That’s what we’re asking you to do, lady—”

They give you a two-week training before they put you on the road. That’s hardly enough to begin to know how to drive the truck manually, and it’s a couple years since I even had that. But nobody expects us to ever really have to drive, whatever the emergency regs say.

Maybe that’s why it caught them flat-footed when a driver made a break for it. It just wasn’t possible.

They were just about right, too.

I leaned forward and yanked the handle marked MANUAL OVERRIDE. I hit the gas. I nearly ran over a cop and I did go right through two trees on my way to the highway. A sound of metal crumpling. I couldn’t look at the road much because it took all my concentration shifting gears, trying to pick up some speed. It took all my concentration and it still sounded awful. I wondered if I was stripping gears. I wondered if I could do anything wrong that would crash the truck.

He set me up. He stole my baby and he set me up. Why would he steal my baby?

I leaned hard on my horn. A big RV just got out of my way in time.

He must have known the checkpoint was coming up. And you need at least one kid to be a trucker. If there was no little Jess, he needed a baby. If he could alter his trucking card, make it look like Cilehe was his, then his only problem was me telling them at the same checkpoint I didn’t have my other baby because he took her from me. I’d still be in trouble, but so would he. And with almost no other guys in the trucks, he’d be easy to track down.

(I was afraid I really gave him Cilehe because I was tired of dealing with her fussing all the time. I never asked to be a mother, but I was one—the worst who ever lived.)

Cars were scattering in front of me. Horns blaring. Out of the corner of my eye I suddenly saw Tomi had climbed up the wall of his playpen to look out at what was going on.

“Get down, Tomi! Get down!” I grabbed out with my right hand and yanked him down hard on the playpen’s mattress. The truck lurched. He went spinning across and hit his head on the other pen wall. The walls are light. I could see it give.

I couldn’t look to see if he was okay. I had to keep changing lanes while I went faster.

That bastard made sure they wouldn't listen to me. He told them I was a child abandoner, so then anything I said would sound like a lie, to save my ass. He went on the offensive before I had a chance.

I started to hear sirens.

I went faster. I was almost to top gear, driving on the shoulder because it was too hard to keep going around cars.

Thank God we were on a flattish stretch.

All the time I thought Cal was someone I could marry to get me and my babies out of the truck, even feeling guilty because I enjoyed his body but I wasn't likely to love him back—all that time he was setting me up.

I realized I was swearing, fast and steady in a low fierce voice. Tomi whimpered. At least he was awake.

“You damn black truck—you fucker—where are you, you son of a bitch?—you fucker, you stole my baby—you bastard, you lied to me!”

Lights began flashing in my side mirrors. The cops were catching up. I had to catch him before they caught me.

I shifted up. I was almost at top gear.

A couple cars split in front of me, screeching out of the way, and there was the bastard. He was going uphill. Black smoke belched out of a side pipe. I hit the foot of the hill and I remembered I had to downshift, fast. The truck couldn't keep that speed climbing. I made myself do it though I just wanted to go faster and faster until I had him—

The truck made horrible noises. I wasn't in the right gear. I slowed and started to lose ground. He must've seen me by now. I shifted, shifted, shifted until it didn't make those awful noises. I didn't care if my truck was trashed—shit, I'd be in prison anyway, my babies God knows where—but I wasn't going to lose that black monster truck.

He hit the top of the hill and vanished from sight. I got there minutes later—I say minutes, but it must have been five seconds. His truck was picking up speed fast. Mine plunged down while my stomach stayed back up top. Tomi wailed. I shifted up and up and shoved the gas to the floor. I was gaining on him. The lights were close in the side mirrors.

I could make out the face of the nearest cop, he was that close. Could see his little blond moustache, even, and the mean way he looked like he was going to kill me if I didn't do it for him first.

A red sports car was half an inch in front of me, getting closer. I had to hit the brakes, and the engine almost died. Almost. I was hitting on the

gearshifter like it was Cal's face, kicking the accelerator like it was his balls.

The black truck ducked ahead of a blue minivan. The van hit its brakes hard and seemed to come right back into me, like Cal had thrown it into my face deliberately.

I swerved. I missed it.

I spent long seconds wrestling with the wheel.

Looked up and saw him cut again in front of some foreign-looking job.

He didn't have it figured right. He was going to plow right into a station wagon in the next lane by the shoulder—

"Cilehe!" I screamed. I hit my horn. I careened onto the shoulder as he careened off it.

There was a steep hill a few yards off the side of the shoulder, and the black truck was about to go straight down it—

I grabbed Tomi, hit the gas hard, and shut my eyes.

The whole world went white.

It shouldn't have worked. I couldn't see because the airbags came bursting out and filled my face with canvas.

My truck caught his trailer right on the side, smashed into it, and spun his truck around almost facing us. I went mostly straight, destroying my cab but not quite me or Tomi, cushioned in airbag. I picked up a concussion, though.

The black truck came to a stop angled over the side of the hill.

But it didn't roll down.

When the cops helped me out of what was left of my cab, I could hardly see straight. I did see that the black truck's trailer had burst open. I saw broken crates. I saw the ugly black metal shapes inside them. And, thank God, I didn't see Cal. If I'd seen him, I don't know what I would have done to him, concussion and all.

I screamed until they put Cilehe in my arms. She was so quiet and good you'd swear she was her brother.

I had time to think in the hospital. When my head cleared— before then, if you believe the nurses—I demanded they run the tests. It was the biggest relief of my life to learn Plan A hadn't worked. A little bit of Cal growing inside me is the last thing I wanted. I know a baby has nothing to do with his daddy. I'm sure no Shawn Parker. But I wanted no piece of Cal. The

plan to have three kids so they'd let me out seems a foolish, childish thing now.

I made them tell me about Cal. They acted like I had no right to know, but they gave in enough to tell me that his real name was Charles Kavey, he was single and had assets of over a million, and was—surprise—no welfare trucker. He worked with his controller, and they made, said the government-lawyer type, “illicit shipments.”

I bet. I don't know anything about high-tech weapons, but I guess I can tell the ugly things when I see them. Interstate 80 could've taken him on to San Francisco, and from there I imagine they could have been smuggled either down to Chile or to the civil war in the Philippines. (News comes on twice a day in the truck, though I always wonder what they're leaving out of it.)

Cal—Charles—and his buddy must have had the system pretty well bamboozled, all the parts that are just computer talking to computer; but when it comes to the checkpoints, human beings make sure your babies match up with what it says on the license. No way around needing a real live kid for that. I guess when he found out about the surprise checkpoint, he was already on the road. He had it down so smooth, he must have used his little trick for getting a kid before. I couldn't even have identified him, if it had ever come to that. He didn't have the braid when he got to the checkpoint—it actually came off somehow, which surprised the hell out of me—and his hair was black and his eyes were dark blue. Contacts and dye. He was real smooth. The bastard enjoyed it too, I bet. Bastard.

He'd had to perform his act on short notice—unless it was a dream when I heard the nurses gossiping. When I did dream after that, the dreams were full of nightmares about a shriveled-up little body jammed in a carton among all the weapons in the black truck's trailer.

Probably the baby's name wasn't even really Jess...

My grandma called the hospital. She wanted to know if she could help. She's got so little I hated to ask her, but I did.

After all, I'm back in the truck as soon as the hospital releases me, and I don't want to stay there.

But if I don't eat desserts, don't buy new clothes and makeup for myself, and take what my grandma can give me, I can start studying. Kimberlea manages; so can I. Even with my allowance cut in half in penalty for smashing up the truck. I can read really good. I'm going to take Kimberlea for a role model and order myself some accounting textbooks. Maybe even, years from now, when I'm out and I've gotten used to computers, I can go

on studying and get a truck controller's license.

Nobody's going to make me keep doing what they want me to do.

My babies are going to be proud of their mama.

## The End

Science fiction, the novitiate soon learns, is not simply a body of literature. It is also a robust and scrappy community—a kind of sentient ant colony in which authors, editors, readers, critics, agents, and publishers come together to argue about everything from the spiral nebulae to the spiraling costs of Nebula banquets.

Communities depend upon benefactors—people such as Martha Soukup, who helps run the Science Fiction Roundtable on GENIE for an amusingly inadequate amount of money and who recently served as SFWA's secretary for no money at all.

Like Ted Chiang, whose "Tower of Babylon" appears in the first half of this volume, Soukup honed her considerable talents at the Clarion Science Fiction Writers Workshop. Upon graduating from that stellar institution, she began selling her fiction with impressive regularity, appearing in *Asimov's*, *Fantasy and Science Fiction*, *Amazing*, *Aboriginal*, and such theme anthologies as *Newer York* and *Alternate Presidents*.

"Over the Long Haul" traces to a workshop exercise in which the instructor, A. J. Budrys, tossed out a provocative concept: long-haul rigs controlled by computer operators from their homes. "It seemed immediately obvious to me," Soukup notes, "that the people stuck in those cabs would be teenage mothers. (It then became clear that everyone else in the room thought I was nuts.)"

"I liked the opportunity the notion offered to look at issues of personal choice and responsibility in a constrained situation. It also let me do a chase scene, which I think of as wild-eyed experimental writing. A. J. kindly let me use his tracks; all that remained was for me to realize that the story had to be written in Shawana's voice.

"One reason the novelette took a while to sell, I think, is that people thought it dystopian. Having lived two blocks from urban projects, and

having read a great deal about welfare hotels, I wish 'Long Haul' were, by comparison, dystopian, or that it could answer the political questions it raises. If I had the answers, I could write novels, instead of short stories that simply question."