Alone in a Crowd

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Steel Hauler

MARY RATHKE

She appeared far too young to have seventeen- and fifteen-year-old sons. An unexpected pregnancy at thirty-seven led to a leave from her job hauling steel.

My mom wanted me to go into the medical profession somehow, as a nurse or as a technician in the lab. And that’s what I started out to do when I went to Seattle University. But I wasn’t interested in physiology, biology, all that stuff. I could do it, but you know, I wasn’t that interested in it. I was doing what my mother wanted me to do, not what I wanted to do. In nineteen sixty-three I dropped out of school. I didn’t have any money so I had to work full time for a while. I went to work at a big insurance company and, believe me, working with an office full of women is the most God-awful way to spend eight hours, especially if it’s a closed office, like if you don’t have the public as a buffer. Women are so bitchy, they’re cliquey; they go on and on and on about who’s got the most paper clips—it’s disgusting. I have never worked in such a horrible situation in all my life, and I never will again, I don’t think. After nine months my attendance record got so bad, they called me into the personnel office and said, “You seem to be having a problem.”

And I said, “Yes, yes, I’ll come on time. I’ll be here every day—blah, blah, blah.” I finally had to quit the job. It was futile.

Then I met the man of my dreams and got married and had a couple of babies. I did some part-time waitressing work and went back to work full time in nineteen sixty-seven. That was at one of the libraries at the U. I liked working at the library
because I like books. Once in a while you did get into the office baloney, but mostly you didn't because there was the public to deal with. They take your mind off the baloney. Then I stayed home for a year or two before going to work in the pre-school my youngest son attended. I liked the kids. I can get into their fantasy games, play with them real easily.

Eventually I got a full-time job with the county library. It must have been seventy-two because both of my kids were in school. I started out as a shipping clerk for minimum wage and worked my way up to the supervisor of the shipping department at the Service Center. The Center provided all the books and stuff for all the branches—Bothell, Burien, Bellevue, all of them. I had eleven people working for me and made a fat three dollars and fifty cents an hour. All the headaches that go with a supervisory position. I discovered after six months that I'm no good at telling people what to do. I can't do it. I'd come home with a stomach ache. Meanwhile, I was sick of working for peanuts, you know, just nothing. And my husband said one day that he saw a girl driving a cement truck, the first one in Seattle. Shoot, I had been driving relief for the library when I had to. So he said, "If you're going to drive a truck and fool around, why don't you drive a big one and make some decent money, like that girl is doing?" This was in nineteen seventy-four and I made the connection in my head; this was when equal rights was beginning to be talked about, and I knew that people with federal contracts had to start hiring minorities. The blacks were beginning to yell a lot about not being hired to work on the Kingdome [Seattle's domed stadium]. With all the federal money on this project, they were discriminating still. And the same was true of women.

So I went down to a sand and gravel company that I knew had the Kingdome contract and also Freeway Park. That's two federally funded things, and I knew they needed a woman. So I walked in and said, "I'd like to learn to drive."
They said, "Yeah, fine, on your own time." So I took a week's vacation from the library and they taught me to drive. I was real nervous that first week while getting taught. They told me that one of the hardest things to convince me of was that I had to keep the throttle, the accelerator, down all the time. I didn't understand that with a truck, once you've got the momentum going, you don't lose it, no matter what. You keep the pedal on the floor the whole time. And I was trying to drive it like a car where you can back off the throttle. They had the hardest time convincing me of that.

I learned on a five-and-four conventional transmission, which means you've got two sticks. It's a bit more complicated than a thirteen-speed; that's real easy to shift. There, you don't have to deal with two sticks and double clutch all of the time. Maybe I had better start over with the basics. On a conventional truck there are two transmissions, a main one and an auxiliary one right behind it. In the main transmission you've got five forward gears and in the little auxiliary you've got another four. I wasn't understanding that at all. The guys would say, "Now you need to be in second-over," or "second-under," or "second-direct," and I would do it, but not understand what was going on.

Finally, what made it click was he said, "Now you need to be in second overdrive." Overdrive! Overdrive! Now I understand what this extra box is about! It was a half-gear under third gear, or a half-gear over, or straight third gear. It just clicked when he said that. So you have a second stick for each transmission. The way it works is you don't start out in first gear. That's too low. You start out in second gear and under, then you go to direct, and then you go to over—all on the auxiliary transmission. Then you shift the main box to third, then under, direct, and over in the auxiliary again. I spent four days learning this and on the fifth day they sent me out by myself. I worked for pay that day and made sixty bucks. It would take me a week at the library
to make the same money. So why was I fooling around at the library? I mulled this over in my mind for a couple months, quit my job, and told the sand and gravel outfit to put me on their call list.

They needed me as a minority, so I worked maybe one or two days a week all winter. Still, in a month I brought home more than I did working full time at the library. Plus, when I wasn't working I could pick up unemployment. And then in the spring and summer—it's seasonal work, you know—things really picked up. I got a lot of hours in.

The dispatcher was a real chauvinist and made suggestive remarks all the time. Once in awhile I felt like I had to sort of play along with him. Otherwise he wasn't going to call me into work. Since I wasn't on the seniority list, he didn't have to call me if he didn't feel like it. I didn't get involved with him or anything, but I couldn't just say, "Knock it off, you idiot." I felt like it sometimes. But I found, like for me, you have to walk on a fence, you have to be willing to put up with a certain amount of teasing and carrying on, and joking. You can't just be straight-arrow rigid. You gotta be willing to be teased, to flirt back. You gotta be willing to just get along. You can't be offended by it. Here you are, the only woman in this man's world, and you'd better get along or get out. But that didn't mean to me that I had to go to bed with anybody or risk my marriage or anything like that.

In general I was treated a lot nicer than the guys were, because I got sent to the easy jobs a lot. Part of that was due to the quota thing. I got to go to the Kingdome and Freeway Park, which were easy jobs because you deliver to a pump and aren't fooling around in somebody's muddy back yard. I actually saw a federal chart for the Kingdome pour with the date, how many loads of concrete were delivered, the names of the drivers, and the races, so I know that one of the reasons I got easy jobs was to satisfy government quotas.
Mary Rathke, steel hauler

I did get thrown off one job because the contractor didn’t want a woman. I could see he thought I was going to be incapable the moment I got to the site. Most contractors are real patient, explaining exactly what they want. Not this guy! He was short and didn’t explain what he wanted, and then started hollering and screaming and swearing at me. I just got more and more upset and nervous about the pour. Then the dispatcher called me on the radio and said, “How come you got thrown off the job?”

I said, “What?” Then he told me the contractor had called him, wanting me off the site. And I said, “Thank God for small favors.” The thing about concrete drivers is all the other drivers can hear all this baloney going on. They’re sitting in their trucks waiting for a load and listening to this on the radio. They told me later they all laughed. It was funny. You should be upset getting thrown off a job, but I was glad.

Another time I ruined an entire load of concrete. It was probably the worst day I had on that job. It was the first winter I worked, and it had gotten icy and was freezing out. The water tanks on the truck have to be drained at night or they’ll freeze. Well, I didn’t know that. There’s a valve that you open to drain the water tank so the water goes into the drum where the cement is. So I got this load to take to the Kingdome, and it turned out this valve had been opened the night before, and I didn’t know how to check it. By the time I got to the Kingdome I was spilling concrete out the back of the truck and it was all watery. I called the dispatcher up to see what kind of awful mix he had given me. It dawned on the dispatcher what had happened and that I should bring it back. It was so embarrassing!

Cement-truck drivers are members of Teamsters Local 174. In the sand and gravel division of the Teamsters Union, at that time, if you worked four hundred hours in six months, the company had to give you seniority. Well, they would work me three hundred and eighty hours and send me down the road to
another company, so they wouldn’t have to put me on the seniority list. So I’d go work for the second company for the next six months until I had too many hours, and they would send me back to the first one, right?—so they didn’t have to put me on the seniority list. The third time that happened to me I lost my temper, and I stomped upstairs and I said to the boss, “You either want to have me work for you or you don’t. I’m either a good employee or I’m not. I want you to stop doing this. I’ve been hanging around for almost two years. Are you going to put me on the seniority list or not?” And he was really mad at my attitude, because I don’t usually say anything until I’m in a rage, I can’t control it any longer. So I lost it and he got really mad at me and said, “We’ll see, blah, blah, blah.” The company did have to pay vacation hours, and I thought with my vacation hours I was going to have enough to get over the four hundred hours required for seniority. So I went in and demanded my vacation pay and thought I would be on their list, whether they liked it or not. Right? Well, they had two plants. One’s in Tacoma and I had worked in the Tacoma plant and hadn’t counted on those hours not counting towards my seniority. So when they gave me my vacation pay and added up my hours, I came up a half an hour short. So that was my big coup, and I didn’t pull it off. So by that time they were so mad at me that they never wanted to see my face again. So I said, “Fine, I never want to see your face again either.” After that I couldn’t get on at any of the cement companies because I didn’t cooperate. The fact that I had cooperated for a year and a half didn’t matter.

So I went down to Mechanica, a job placement service for women doing non-traditional work, and got referred to a steel manufacturer. That was in April of seventy-seven. I got through the interview and then got sent out on a road test with a mechanic to see if I could drive or not. So what they were going to have me drive was a semi, you know, that pulls a forty-foot trailer. I’d never done that. I’d just driven concrete trucks. The
truck they had me drive was completely different from anything I'd ever touched. It had a Detroit engine, which is a lot different from a Mack, and had a Road Ranger transmission. A Road Ranger transmission is almost like an automatic. It's just one stick with a button on it. And a Detroit engine, as opposed to a Cummins engine, operates in a much smaller r.p.m. range. You've only got two or three hundred r.p.m.'s in which to move. With a Cummins it is six or seven hundred. You've got a long way to go before you have to shift again. In a Detroit, you just have to keep it all together. You can't be so loose. First, they tested me with just the tractor, and then I had to do it with the trailer hooked up. Going ahead wasn't bad, but backing up was something else. I knew I had to do everything exactly opposite with the trailer, but I had all these patterns from backing up with the concrete trucks. Anyway, I survived the trailer test, and they said to come to work on the next Monday. So I started there, not knowing anything about driving this equipment, without any training and I just had to teach myself, which is what I did. I faked it when I had to, and the rest of the time hoped nobody was looking. I was their first woman driver so it was all real new for them.

They have two plants. At the one in Kent, which is where the big furnaces are, they melt the scrap down into steel, and in Ballard they roll the steel into rebar [steel reinforcing for construction]. The core of the driving job is hauling the steel from Kent to Ballard. It was a forty-five-minute trip. I could do four loads a day. Loading and unloading is done with an electromagnetic crane. There are crane operators, but you have to land the steel on the bed of the truck and chain it down. The thing that dawned on me was that construction was a whole new world. One of the real glaring differences was that men help each other and cooperate. Without saying words, like "Let's lift this thing," they automatically do it. Women don't operate that way. I have never seen women in an office operate like that.
Men automatically work together. I don't know if they've been taught that from childhood or what, but they do. The other thing that dawned on me was that the bigger the job you have to do, the less physically demanding it is, because you have equipment to do it for you. You don't depend on your own muscles. Now if you're hauling twenty-five-pound parcels around all day, you're going to be more tired than if you're hauling five-thousand-pound ingots of steel 'cause the equipment does the lifting for you. So what you want to do is get into a big job where they're working with big stuff—I'm not kidding you—'cause then you're relying on equipment and not your back.

When I wasn't hauling steel between the two plants, I was hauling it to construction sites. In a lot of ways that is easier than hauling cement to the same sites, because concrete can't wait. Steel can wait all day if it has to. So you sit and read, have pop or whatever, while you're waiting. On the big jobs there are ironworkers to unload the stuff for you so all you have to do is take the cables and binders off, and then the ironworkers hook the steel up and get it off. I've delivered steel all over the state. For a while we were delivering to the Chief Joseph Dam. Leave the plant at three o'clock in the morning, get to the dam about nine or nine-thirty, and get back at around three-thirty or four o'clock in the afternoon. Those were fourteen-hour days, real hard days.

Most of the time I really love my job. You're given a job to do and you're expected to go do it, and I like that. One of the neatest things is to have a song that I like come on the radio in my truck, and it's a sunny day, I'm way up high, traffic is fine, no hassles, and I haven't got a load to be nervous about and check all of the time. That is the greatest feeling in the world—the music, the sun, and wheeling along the freeway. I really love it. I like being on the road where you haven't got somebody looking over your shoulder, bitching all the time.
Mary Rathke, steel hauler

Sometimes driving’s a little scary. Mostly I’m pretty cautious. If I’ve got a real shaky-looking load, usually I’ll say, “I don’t like the looks of this load, and if part comes off on the highway, you buy the ticket ’cause I’m telling you right now I don’t like the way it looks.” Our contract says if something looks unsafe, you can say, “I’m not going to drive it.” But sometimes you have to just go, and you cross your fingers and hope that you don’t lose it. There have been some real scary times when I’ve driven up and down the road crying because I’ve been so scared.

One time a guy got hurt and I cried all the rest of the day. I was going to park the truck and go home, but my boss wouldn’t let me. He did the right thing, because if I had parked it, I never would have gotten back on a truck again. I didn’t run over anybody, but at a job site a guy walked under a chute I was lowering, hit his head, and cut his forehead open pretty good. They had to send him to the hospital. I take that kind of stuff seriously. And driving in the snow. Sometimes when you’ve lost it, when the trailer starts coming around on you, that’s frightening. Then you wonder, “Why couldn’t you be satisfied with staying in your kitchen? What are you doing in the middle of a snowstorm?” But then there are the sunny days with the radio, and it all balances out.

I’m not working right now. I took a six-month maternity leave, and when I was supposed to go back, the Steelworkers were on strike, and at that point drivers weren’t crossing the picket line. Since then the Teamsters have decided to go back, but I haven’t been called back. I’m glad I haven’t been involved. The strikers were throwing rocks and things. One guy got his face cut and they had to have the cops down there for a few days. I guess they still do. I’m glad I’m not there. I don’t know why we’re crossing the picket line. The Teamsters usually have honored the strikes of the Steelworkers. I don’t think the re-
verse would be true 'cause there's only half a dozen drivers. There are over a hundred and fifty steelworkers, and that's a lot of people to be out over six people's rights.

I heard the company used scabs to drive the trucks at first, and they don't seem to be making any effort to settle with the Steelworkers, so maybe they don't want to deal with unions any more. I don't know. The drivers' position is real weak. The two senior drivers are in their late fifties and don't want to switch jobs. And since there's so few of us, we don't have the power to do anything. If we're offered anything reasonable, we'll go for it. And the Teamsters in the past have always encouraged settlement. They haven't backed strikes at all.

Anyhow, like I was saying, I got pregnant and that really changed things. I lost my temper a few times. Mostly it was chemical and hormonal more than anything else, but I was a whole lot harder to get along with. I was really feeling sorry for myself and throwing temper tantrums right and left. I used my pregnancy to vent my emotions. My attitude got to be, "I don't give a damn! I'm a person, too; I can get mad"—that was my attitude while pregnant.

One job we do requires putting rain tarps on the truck. Now a rain tarp for a forty-foot trailer weighs about one hundred pounds, and we had to have two of them, one for the front half and one for the back half of the trailer. That's probably our crummiest job. It's a bitch, and you have to do it in the rain. You get soaking wet; it's heavy work, and you come home beat. Anyway, it was wintertime and I had just discovered I was pregnant, and I was already four months along and feeling very sorry for myself, when my boss sent me out on that job. And I stomped upstairs, up to the big boss, and I said, "Well, I'm not doing that job anymore, blah, blah, blah, because I'm pregnant. And if I lose this baby it's gonna be your fault!" You know, on and on about it, and he was real nice about it, you know. I'm sure
that after I walked out, he was just shakin’ his head like I’m some kind of crazy lady.

If I continue that way, I’m sure they’ll fire me. The thing of it was that I was so angry all of the time. My husband was unemployed, and I felt so sorry for myself because I had to do this very, very hard job in my condition. I took it out on the guys at work and they were real good about it. They should have told me a long time ago, “Stuff it, Mary. We don’t want to hear it.”

But they didn’t. In fact, they practiced reverse discrimination and put me on an easier job than I had been doing. They didn’t create the job for me. Hauling scrap, which is a bit easier, had to be done anyway. And nobody got bent out of shape about my doing it steadily. The guy I bumped from the job didn’t care. They’re all nice guys, real understanding. They did tease me about working so far into my pregnancy. I worked up until six weeks before delivery, and towards the end I was getting really big. I was really tired all of the time, my mood was really crummy, and I was getting to be a drag to be around. The guys kept asking me when I was going to quit, and when I finally did come in and say, “Two weeks from now is my last day,” you know, my boss said, “God, I thought you were never gonna go!” Everybody had that reaction. “Jeez, we thought you were gonna go on forever!” In fact they were making jokes that “pretty soon we’ll have to deliver it here. In the sleeper, no less—jokes like that. And I didn’t know that was the attitude until I let people know that my last day was coming up.

Okay, I had intended to be working until I was vested in the union. I think that’ll take another three or four years. With ten years you get retirement, not full retirement, but something. This baby has thrown a monkey wrench into the works. I don’t like the idea of working full time with a baby, so I don’t know what I’m going to do. Maybe I’ll open a day-care center. I’ve been looking for day care for him and what’s available is just pathetic.
There’s a need for good day care and that’s the other thing I like to do—take care of kids. I don’t know why those two things are attractive to me—taking care of kids and driving truck. I could do day care for a few years and then go back to driving truck if I haven’t fallen apart by that time. I’ll be pretty old. I always thought that once I approached forty, I’d look pretty ridiculous in a semi. But the closer I get to forty, the more I think I’ll change that to fifty.