Shepherds, wolves and lizards: Exploring the truck stop sex trade during the last days of the American trucker

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The largest truck stop in the world is on the outskirts of Walcott, Iowa, pop. 1,629. Sitting on a 225-acre plot just off Interstate 80, Iowa 80 is a campus-sized oasis for truck drivers crossing the high plains. At night, truck drivers can see the large red neon “Iowa 80” sign floating above the 67,000-square-foot main building, which houses a gym, a dentist’s office, a chiropractor’s office, a barber shop, a food court (Iowa 80 Kitchen, Wendy’s, Taco Bell, Pizza Hut, Dairy Queen, Blimpie) an arcade, a laundromat, a library, a movie theater, a gym, a gift store and “super truck showroom.” There’s a trucking museum that occupies another building nearby, as well as a fuel center, a truck service center, a distribution center, a truck washing facility, a certified scale, and a blue water tower emblazoned with “World’s Largest Truckstop” in yellow comic sans. All of this is surrounded by 900 elongated parking spaces shaped for tractor trailer trucks.

Abraham Rash was parked in one of those spots on a cold Saturday night in February 2005 when he was propositioned by a teenage runaway looking to sell sex to truckers.

Rash was 25 years old and was driving an eighteen-wheeler for Swift Transportation, the largest trucking company in North America. On this particular job, he drove from Chicago to Salt Lake City along Interstate 80, the second longest highway in the country, which runs from Teaneck, New Jersey to San Francisco. It was close to midnight when the snow began to fall on his windshield as he crossed the border into Iowa. But the time he passed through Davenport, the snow was falling hard and he knew he would either have to stop and put chains on his tires, a long arduous process, or park for the night. He chose the latter.

By the time Rash pulled into Iowa 80 it was after midnight and the lot was nearly full. He had to park near the back of the lot, far from the headlights and foot traffic near the main building at the center of the complex. He got in one of the two beds in the back of his truck’s cab with a portable DVD player and drifted off. A knock on the door of his truck soon woke him.

Rash knew ignoring the knock was not an option. A knock could be a police officer or a highway patrolman. But often when he heard a knock on his door in the middle of the night, it was a female sex worker offering her services to lonely truck drivers. With the snow falling and the temperature below freezing, he assumed it was somebody running a plow who wanted him to move his truck.

But when he looked out the window of his truck door, he saw not a woman but a girl, a girl shivering in the cold, with teeth chattering, wearing next to nothing: a short tube top, tiny shorts and five-inch heels. She was garishly made up; the juxtaposition between her appearance and her age, which seemed so young, made her look like a middle schooler at the roller rink presenting herself publicly as a sexual being for the first time. He rolled down the window a crack.

“Can I come in and warm up?” she asked.

This was a fairly typical line sex workers use to initiate a transaction with truck drivers. Rash had heard it before. He was used to telling women at his door in the middle of the night, often red-eyed and looking strung out on drugs, to get lost. But he was worried about this girl. She looked so young. And she was wearing next to nothing as the snow and temperature continued to fall.

“You can come in and warm up, but nothing is going to happen, okay?” Rash said. “If you try anything, I’m throwing you out.”
She nodded and he warily opened the door, scanning the immediate area for an accomplice who might try to rob him. She climbed in. She said her name was “Molly.” He gave her a blanket to warm up. She tried, clumsily to make a move on him.

“Do you want me to throw you out?” he asked. She said no.

He made her coffee and cooked her instant noodles. He asked her what she was doing here, in February, at an Iowa truck stop at 2 a.m., prostituting herself to truck drivers.

She began to cry.

“The frontier,” Frederick Jackson Turner said, “is the outer edge of the wave -- the meeting point between savagery and civilization.” Speaking at a time when the Army had won the last of the Indian wars and trains were crossing the continent, Jackson was eulogizing the frontier, it’s impact on the American character, “that dominant individualism, working for good and for evil.”

You can find good and evil at the truck stops that dot the country. They are ports of entry and departure outside the great cities and the waypoints across the great middle.

If the frontier exists in any current form, it’s here, along the highways, for at least a few years longer, before automation puts 800,000 long-haul truckers, whose average age is 55, out of work. Like Turner’s frontier, it is also defined by motion, but instead of westward motion, it’s more like a perpetual humming: the internal movement that connects us and our cities to our goods. It’s the highways, the spaces in between our cities and towns, where goods and drugs and sex are traded, where Americans of any class can still die sudden and violent deaths, where giant machines piloted by people who are 94 percent men keep the economy moving and do the dirty work that makes our consumptive lives possible. These men, and some women, spend weeks at a time in solitary, lonely transit, working impossible hours, away from home for weeks and sometimes months at a time in order to herd *stuff*, 70 percent of all our *stuff*, across the country.

Truck stops are on the paths of their migrations, and at those more than 1,200 truck stops ecosystems have emerged, ecosystems that live off of their need for internal combustion, food and companionship. The quick and transactional kind.

Of course, there are more ways to find companionship electronically than ever before, and truckers aren’t insulated from digital hook up culture (although they are stuck on the lot unless they want to hire a cab or Uber.) But, there’s still a sex market, a sort of anachronism, at many truck stops.

“We use Tinder and OKcupid, just like everybody else,” said Antonio Gallegos, a five-year veteran of the trucking industry. He became a long haul trucker after graduating from college in California in 2010 and finding the job market bare and his student loans imposing.

“But the real nitty gritty stuff, the stuff you see in TVs and movies, that still goes on. Most definitely.”

Truck stops originally only offered diesel fuel at the pumps. They began popping up after WWII as trucks handled more and more of the nation’s freight and Eisenhower’s interstate highway system spread. By the early 1970s, the first truck stop chains appeared at nearly the same time the trucking culture went mainstream. In a moment where hitchhiking was common and teenagers were likely to ride with truckers from time to
time, the trucker was celebrated in country songs and depicted on the screen as a hero in movies like *Smokey and the Bandit* and *Convoy*. Represented by Jimmy Hoffa and the Teamsters, perhaps the nation’s most powerful union, the trucking industry was heavily regulated, which ensured truckers were well-compensated. In 1979, the average trucker made about $100,000 a year in today’s dollars. (The average trucker makes about $40,000 today, working far more hours, with much longer time away from home.)

When the trucking industry was deregulated with bipartisan support in 1980, driver pay and shipping rates plummeted. News of highway serial killers, both real and imagined, put an end to hitchhiking. It was during this time that the term “lot lizard” first appeared to describe truck stop sex workers.

Drivers who are interested in sex park in the back row of the lot, which is known throughout the industry as “party row.” Sex workers will sometimes knock on doors, but that’s a risky and desperate move. Often they will walk down a row of parked trucks, and a trucker will flash his lights when he sees a women he is interested in. But usually, sex workers will gather in a “safe truck” and use the truck’s CB radio to advertise sex. A driver will provide a “safe truck” in exchange for free sex, or just for the excitement of being the epicenter of the lot’s action. The safe truck provides a sanctuary from cops or a roaming security car, which truckers alert each other to using their CB radios.

Sex workers typically offer “company” when talking over the CB. When an agreement is made, the driver will tell the sex worker what color his “house” is as a way of describing his truck. While different sex workers have variable rates for performing various sex acts, the industry standard menu is $40 for oral sex, $60 for vaginal sex and $80 for both. Many sex workers make $400 to $600 a night. But how much of that money actually ends up in the hands of the sex worker, and how much in the hands of a pimp or human trafficker, depends on the sex worker, and whether he or she has had an agency is choosing this life, or whether it has been forced upon them -- violently.

The frontier can be a savage place.

Molly told Rash she was a sixteen-year-old runaway from a small town in Nebraska. She explained that she lived with an alcoholic father who was never around. She had fallen in love with an older boy at her high school who joined the army upon graduation. When he was shipped off to the Middle East, leaving her all alone in a small town that didn’t understand her, she decided she would make a run for it. She heard she could make $800 a night selling herself at truck stops. She had made it almost across Iowa when she ran out of money. Now it was time to work. She told Rash his was the first door she had knocked on. He was inclined to think this was a line, but the tears she delicately wiped away from her heavily made-up eyes made him think that perhaps it wasn’t.

“I need to do it and get it over with,” she said. “Or I’ll lose my nerve.”

Rash told her it wasn’t going to happen with him. But it was still snowing and he couldn’t in good conscience kick her out, or let her keep trying on doors. Nor did he want her to keep trying to make money around the lot. He let her sleep in the top bunk, the one he usually used for storage. He was worried about someone finding her in his truck, either the police or a pimp. But he didn’t think he had a choice. He was aware that if she left the truck and went back out into the night, her life could radically and permanently change.
Beth Jacobs awoke at a truck stop outside of Chicago in 1980, and the first trucker she met was there not like Rash. He wanted to pay for sex, sex with her. But he wasn’t going to pay Jacobs. He was going to pay the man who had agreed to give her a ride home a few hours before. It was the start of a six year ordeal.

Jacobs admits she was a handful as a teenager. She grew up in Milaca, Minnesota, a small town an hour’s drive north of Minneapolis, where she constantly fought with her mother. Her parents were divorced and her dad lived in Brooklyn Center, a northern suburb of Minneapolis. When she was 16 she moved in with him after dropping out of high school. She took the bus into the center of town nearly every day to take her GED class. One day while waiting for the bus, she started talking to a man named Peter. He invited her to come play pool with him at a bar across the street. She was underage, but Peter knew the bartender and she was allowed in. Sometimes after class she would wait at the bar for the bus. Pete introduced her to his friends, he even invited her to a barbecue one afternoon. She met his ex-wife, with whom he had a amicable relationship. She vouched for what a good guy he was. Afterward, he and his friends drove Jacobs home. She thought he was cute and living in a new town, not knowing anybody, she was glad for the attention.

One day she missed the bus while hanging out in the bar. She had to call her dad to come pick her up, and he scolded her for being irresponsible. The next day she missed the bus again, and, not wanting to let her father down, she got a ride home from Peter. He said they were just going to swing by a friend’s house first. She said that was fine. They stopped by McDonald’s and got drinks. He handed her one. She started drinking it as they pulled onto the highway. She quickly drifted off, and when she awoke it was dark and they were parked in a truck stop. She knew something was wrong.

“Baby, you know who I am?” Peter asked her. “I’m a pimp.”

She laughed. That was ridiculous. Peter was a nice guy. But he didn’t seem to be joking, and she quickly became scared. She tried to get out of the car, but he grabbed her by the hair and hit her. He pointed to a nearby truck and explained to her that she would have sex with the trucker inside for money, and that they would use that money to make it the rest of the way to Chicago. She refused. He hit her again and told her if she didn’t do it, he would have her father killed.

The trucker raped her and she cried throughout. She cried so much that the trucker demanded some of his money back from Peter, who gave it to him, and then proceeded to beat Jacobs in the parking lot of the truck stop. It was not subtle: people saw, and no one intervened.

Jacobs was a victim of sex trafficking for six years. She was based in Chicago, forced to work street corners and hotels, but her trafficker and his team would run her and other girls across the country, stopping at truck stops along the way. The traffickers would give her a quarter, and she would use it to tap on the windows of parked trucks. The quarter would make a loud noise inside the cab, but was barely audible over the din of the highway and the mechanical sounds of the truck stop at night.
Jacobs eventually escaped. She continued to sell sex for four months after while living in a hotel, not sure of what else to do, not sure of what else she could do. She eventually found help, even went to college and got a degree. She became a social worker in Minnesota and worked with women who were leaving, and trying to leave, sex work. Today, she runs Willow Way, the only support group for victims of trafficking in the Tucson area. This summer she started giving presentations to groups representing the trucking industry, law enforcement, and state motor vehicle and transportation departments on behalf of Truckers Against Trafficking, a non-profit dedicated to training truckers to recognize and report sex trafficking, which used to be seen as prostitution in all but the most extreme cases. The assumption was that the person selling sex must have chosen to sell sex. That perception is changing.

“We never used to talk about it,” Jacobs said. “I think people are realizing these are not grown women making choices.”

Over the last 20 years, sex trafficking has become one of the most passionate causes of the evangelical right, especially among the younger demographics, who call themselves abolitionists and the $32 billion a year global sex trade slavery. (Truckers Against Trafficking was started by church group called Chapter 61 ministries.) Atlanta-based Pastor Louie Giglio started the Passion conferences in 1997, which now attract 60,000 Christian students and young adults every year. His organization has an annual “shine a light on slavery day.” He has called Jesus “the ultimate abolitionist, the original abolitionist.”

This push helped influence policy. The first federal human trafficking law, the Trafficking Victims Protection Act (TVPA), was passed in 2000, and has been reauthorized in 2005, 2008 and 2013. In September, Senator Kirsten Gillibrand of New York introduced a bill that would clear the records of human trafficking victims, who often are arrested on prostitution and drug charges while being trafficked.

In 2003, the FBI established the Innocence Lost National Initiative, and has since coordinated semi-annual nationwide busts of traffickers and prostitution rings. The sting’s tenth incarnation, called Operation Cross Country X, was completed in October with the participation of more than 400 law enforcement agencies. The FBI reported it freed 82 minors and arrested 239 traffickers in the U.S. While reports and prosecutions of human trafficking have increased in recent years, it’s hard to tell whether this is because of increased awareness or an actual increase in instances of the crime.

“We don’t know,” an FBI spokesperson said when asked if human trafficking is increasing. “But what we do know is that organized criminal activity is moving into it. A commodity like drugs is a one-use thing. A girl or buy can be sold for cash over and over again….we often see it around truck stops and major sporting events.”

Prostitutes are at truck stops because there are buyers there. Most truckers are men and trucking is a lonely job; it often requires two to three months straight on the road. Relationships become very hard to maintain. Put hundreds of these men together at night in rows and rows of what are essentially private rooms, and it’s not hard to see why there’s a market for sex at truck stops, particularly truck stops in poor communities, both rural and urban, where there are few other opportunities for women. Truck stops outside
of Indianapolis, Birmingham and Little Rock have reputations as places where the sex trade is thriving on the lot.

Documentarian Alex Perlman set out for those lots to make his film Lot Lizard, which debuted at London’s Raindance Film Festival in September. Perlman, a 31-year-old New York City native, traveled throughout the U.S. for three months trying to get prostitutes and truckers to talk to him.

The result is a harrowing documentary that follows three prostitutes in their forties and fifties, one of which is trying to go straight. The film’s three protagonists are “independents,” that is, they aren’t affiliated with any pimps. And all the other sex workers interviewed in the film appear to be independents as well. But many, as one might imagine, didn’t want to be interviewed on camera, and none of the women and girls who had pimps did. Perlman estimated the divide between truck stop sex workers with pimps and without was close to 50/50, a much different breakdown than Truckers Against Trafficking Executive Director Kendis Paris, and much of the abolitionist wing of the anti-trafficking movement, sees. Paris, like Beth Jacobs, believes that all, or nearly all truck stop sex worker are there against their will.

“It’s not a profession,” Paris said. “It’s an oppression.”

Early on Perlman’s film, a sex worker with her face hidden by shadows explains how she entered the business by choice.

“I ain’t never think I could do something like that. I can’t sell my body for money. Ain’t that much money in the world,” she said. “Once you do it, you know, and you see how easy it is to, I don’t mean to talk like this, but make somebody come in like two minutes for 60, 80, 100 bucks? It grows on you. And it grows fast. It’s almost like an addiction. Not my mom, my dad, my brothers, nobody had to help me. I did this on my own. Look what I had to do to get it, but I got it. And who can take it from me? See what I’m saying? I love it. I love it.”

Any discussion of agency among sex workers at truck stops, however, is complicated by drug addiction. Perlman said most of the sex workers he talked to were on drugs, mostly crack. “That’s sort of a chicken or the egg type thing,” he said. “Do you prostitute yourself because you’re on drugs? Or do you start doing drugs to numb yourself for prostitution?”

Drugs and economic desperations cloud clear binaries like “trafficked person” and “sex worker.” But Alexandra Lutnick, author of “Domestic Minor Sex Trafficking: Beyond Victims and Vilians,” and a senior research scientist at RTI International, a nonprofit research institute, says that the popular narrative of enslaved cisgendered girls that drives anti-trafficking efforts misrepresents how minors are involved with the sex trade. “The idea of a young person being taken and forced to sell sex is the exception, not the rule,” Lutnick said. “When young people have a third party involved, nearly all the time it’s someone who is known to them.”

However, there are still real instances of minors and adults alike being forced into sex work against their will, often violently so.

“What seems to be emerging from the research is that maybe 10 to 15 percent of the time, there is a dynamic that is characterized by violence from the beginning of the relationship,” Lutnick said. Often that moment of violence comes when a minor is alone. It could certainly happen when a teenage runaway is wondering around truck stop lot in the early morning, trying to work up the courage to sell herself.
Rash spent a mostly sleepless night sleeping in the bunk below Molly. He was worried about a pimp or somebody else coming to bang on his door. He was worried what would happen if he did have to move his truck, somebody saw an underage girl in his cab. He was putting his job on the line. He was also worried about Molly robbing him.

At 5:30 in the morning Rash took Molly to the truck stop’s chapel, where a man and woman were setting up for the day’s services. Rash told them the situation and that Molly needed help.

The man, a Vietnam vet, was skeptical of Rash. He was suspicious that he was trying to dump a girlfriend he had grown tired of on his ministry. “I found her right here,” Rash insisted. “She needs help.”

Calls were made. A police cruiser arrived, and then a social worker. Rash called his dispatcher, explained the situation, and told him he would be hitting the road late. But he still had to leave. There was a warehouse in Salt Lake City waiting for a shipment.

He gave Molly his email and told her to stay in touch. She has.

Molly eventually finished high school. She then headed for California, where she hitchhiked around for a few months. Now she lives in Oregon with her husband and son.

Rash thinks about what would have happened if she had knocked on some other door.

“That kind of haunts me,” Rash said. “Does she die? Maybe, she was not far from hypothermia. Does someone else take her in? I like to think most drivers are good people. I like to think she would have got the same treatment from 98 percent of drivers.”

On a beautiful fall morning in Bordentown, N.J., six men, all truckers, are sitting in a windowless room in the back of the Petro Bordentown truck stop, a sprawling facility located at the convergence of several of the Northeast’s major highways. It’s Sunday morning and they are here for church.

“If a car cuts you off, give a prayer for them,” Chaplain Kevin, a man with a white beard dressed in all denim tells the congregation. “Because they don’t know how close they came to getting crushed by 80,000 pounds.”

When Kevin asks if anyone is going home this week, a black man in his fifties with a large beard and round belly, who had been supplying the proceedings with periodic “Amens,” says that he has been on the road for eight straight weeks.

“I’ve been doing this for 28 years,” he says. “I wouldn’t have it any other way.”

Suddenly, the men start talking over each other, all bearing witness to the trucking life.

“Truck driving is not a job, it’s a way of life.” says a man in a grey USA t-shirt, who explains that he was off the road for five years, a time in which he was restless and miserable.

“It’s not a job, it’s career,” another driver chimes in.

“It’s a lifestyle!”

There are murmurs of agreement. “Amen,” somebody says.

The sermon ends. A view G-rated jokes are told as the men file out. A driver for a New Brunswick, Canada outfit called Conners Transportation dressed in all black named Merrill takes the time to sit with a reporter in the hallway outside the room where the
service was held, which has already been turned into a movie room. He was a pastor years ago, and he was a coach at his last trucking job, which meant he rode with people for the first few months they were on the road as a trainer and observer. He’s coached more than sixty truckers and he has come to see truckers like the shepherds of the bible.

“Shepherds were very necessary part of the economy. But they were loathed, partially because of the nature of their work,” Merrill said. “They’re out in the fields. They’re separate from everybody else. But they were needed. Just like us.”

Merrill apologized for cutting the conversation short. He had to get back on the road. He stood up and walked out into the lot, where Chaplain Kevin was walking from truck to truck, knocking on doors, handing out pamphlets with the Word, which he hoped would provide some comfort to lonely men.