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ARE YOU OUR NEXT COVER?
“You go out with the guy for your road test and you get 20 miles outside town, then he tells you to pull over. Now he tells you — either you put out or get out. That’s what we call the ‘Sleeper Test.’ When you don’t go for it, as soon as you get back to town they tell you you flunked their road test.”

— Bitsy Gomez
Arylicue “Bitsy” Gómez fell in love with trucks when she was four. She would tie a wagon to the back of her tricycle and practice backing it up.

One time she saw a tractor-trailer rig backing into a grocery store. While her playmates walked on to kindergarten, Bitsy waited and watched. When her friends walked past the store several hours later on their way home, Bitsy was still there, entranced by the majestic machine, by its power and by the cavernous trailer that seemed to be bigger than the whole world. For her curiosity, she received a paddling at home and a scolding from her teacher.

But her fascination with trucks and trailers grew. It stayed with her even after her marriage to a musician, after three children and after jobs as a cocktail waitress at a couple of posh Chicago night clubs.

She rubbed shoulders with entertainers and stars — people she met through her job or her husband. There were always parties, glitter and the high life. Bitsy, though, was still smitten by the smell of diesel fuel and the smooth gliding of gears as an 18-wheeler builds up speed.

More than anything else, Bitsy wanted to drive trucks. Her chance came after her divorce. She packed up her three children and headed west to California. Bitsy couldn’t afford to go to a professional truckers’ school, so she worked around the Los Angeles Produce Market, loading and unloading trucks.

One day at the produce market, Bitsy met a woman from Minnesota who drove her own truck. She hired Bitsy as a relief driver, running produce between Los Angeles and St. Paul, and that was how she learned the profession.

Bitsy, 32, is a full-fledged trucker. At five-foot-two and 105 pounds, she fits no stereotypes. Her brown hair frames a pretty face. She is feminine, refined and conversant. And she is also an activist. Bitsy is a founder and a leader of the Coalition of Women Truck Drivers, a group that has fought sexism and discrimination, forcing trucking firms and the government to consider women for their driving ability and not their gender.

Trucking experts estimate that there are about two million drivers hauling freight across the nation’s highways in those huge rigs called “semis,” and about 25,000 are women.

“The trucking industry just isn’t the muscle industry it used to be,” says Teamster official Fernando Muniz. “Today’s equipment is a lot easier to handle. The women we have in the Teamsters are very, very good drivers. They do the same job as any man. They are competing time-wise, getting up in the middle of the night when they have to and doing everything else the men do. Women today are more self-reliant. They get out there and do whatever they have to.”

For Bitsy and women like her, getting a Class One license (needed for long-haul trucking) and some solid experience is no guarantee of steady work. Generally in the trucking industry, job longevity is rare. During the past 10 years, Bitsy’s longest stretch for any trucking company has been six months. But periods of unemployment are not the only annoyances endured by women truckers.

Sexual harassment is a very real thing for the minority of women trying to make a living in the macho-romanticized world of trucking.

“First you hustle like mad to get your Class One license,” Bitsy explains. “Then when you apply for a job, they can make you take a road test. Even though most companies can waive road tests for drivers with Class One licenses and don’t normally ask a man to take them, as soon as a woman shows up it becomes mandatory.
“So you go out with the guy for your road test and you get 20 miles outside town, then he tells you to pull over. Now he tells you — either you put out or get out. That’s what we call the ‘Sleeper Test.’ When you don’t go for it, as soon as you get back to town they tell you you flunked their road test.”

In some instances, even when a woman lands a good job she can come in for sexual antagonism. Two national trucking companies operate what amount to brothels on wheels.

“They say they’re running married couples, but it’s usually just a driver and a victim. They hire single women and then give them to the guys running the best times, the ones with the best records. it’s like a reward,” says Bitsy.

They [male truckers] are a friendly lot on the whole, eager to exchange stories of highway conditions, police traps and other useful travel gossip. But when you mention women truckers, the eyes grow hard. “They’re a bunch of broads,” is a common reply.

“At least a dozen different companies have put men into my truck. First you hire on as a solo and then at the last minute they stick a man in with you. Maybe two of those times they had legitimate reasons, like a blizzard was coming up and they felt they needed a second driver on board. But it still doesn’t let you get more than fifteen miles out of town before you go to shift gears and a hand comes out of the sleeper, slips around your waist and a voice says, ‘Honey, pull this thing over and come back here with me. I can’t sleep!’

“That’s when you jump out and tell him to go put that truck where it will do him the most good. Or you drop a dime to call the boss and you tell him — ‘What are you paying me for, to drive this truck or to ball this dude?’ And when he says, ‘To drive!’, I say — ‘Swell! Then put him on a Greyhound or I’m coming home!’ And usually they will pull him off the job right then and there.

For the most part, though, truckdriving is a dream come true for Bitsy Gomez.

“There’s a very special feeling with a truck,” she says. “It’s part of your identity. You are the driver of that truck. People will often remember your truck before they remember you. You could be talking to somebody at a truck stop, telling them how you once worked for Calder out of south Texas, and they’ll say — ‘Oh yeah, didn’t you used to drive that white van?’ They place the truck before the face.

“A driver’s identity is tied up with his truck. Just go into any truck stop and you can pick out a steel hauler from a bull hauler just by looking at them. Steel haulers look like blue collar workers, bull haulers look like cowboys, furniture haulers wear little green jump suits that say MAYFLOWER LINES on them — just sitting around a truck stop, you can nearly always match the drivers to their trucks parked outside.

“Of course you can’t be in love with your truck 24 hours a day. Some days you feel like getting out and shoving the whole damn thing over the side of a mountain. When your reefer (translation — refrigeration unit) goes out in the middle of the Mojave Desert after you’ve been running three days and nights and it’s Sunday afternoon when all the repair shops are closed, that’s when you start looking for a farmer to sell you some dynamite!”

The person/machine identity has its problem sides. Women truckers report how some men resent their attachment to their truck and become jealous of it.

“They hate the fact that the truck gives you a living,” she theorizes. “It supports you and takes you wherever you want to go. When a woman stays home, a man’s laundry, sews on his buttons and sends him out for a haircut when he’s shaggy, she’s polishing him, right? So when you’re polishing your truck and sharpening it up, some dudes will stand around whining about it and it’s obvious they’re competing with that truck.

“Some drivers have this big masculinity thing with a truck, like a biker with his bike. But if a woman has her own truck too, where does that leave him? It blows his macho identity. Some former boyfriends actually told me, ‘You love that truck more than you love me. Go park that thing or I won’t be here when you get back.’ I feel sorry for anybody who’s that hung up, but it’s just tough. Trucking is my life and my identity, too, so they better get used to it.”

When you press for their feelings, they may wisecrack how a woman’s place is at home or on her back “breathin’ hard.”

To speed the industry’s foot dragging, Bitsy helped organize the Coalition of Women Truck Drivers as an offshoot of N.O.W.’s Los Angeles chapter. Passing the word cross country by CB radio and notices tacked up at truck stops, letters, wires and telephone calls poured in. Today the Coalition has 500 active members and double that number of affiliates. New chapters are operating in San Diego, Santa Maria, Dallas, Atlanta and Seattle.