

Steve Lopez

Columnist Steve Lopez joined the staff of The Times in May 2001, after four years at Time Inc. where he wrote for Time, Sports Illustrated, Life and Entertainment Weekly as editor-at-large.

While at Time, he helped establish the Bonus Section, a series of narrative news features. His first story in the series, about the French capture of Philadelphia hippie guru and suspected murderer Ira Einhorn, won a Society of Professional Journalists Award for national magazines.



He also was the author of Time magazine's "Campaign diary," a road journal filed during the 2000-01 presidential campaign; and of the weekly, "American Scene" column, for which he traveled the United States.

Prior to joining Time Inc., Lopez was a columnist at The Philadelphia Inquirer, where he won the H.L. Mencken Writing Award, the Ernie Pyle Award for human interest writing and a National Headliner Award for column writing. During his 12 years at the Inquirer, he filed dispatches from Iraq, Bosnia, Colombia and the Soviet Union.

His earlier newspaper jobs were at the San Jose Mercury News, the Oakland Tribune and three other daily newspapers in Northern California.

He is the author of three novels, "Third and Indiana," "The Sunday Macaroni Club," and "In the Clear." A collection of his columns is published in the book "Land of Giants: Where No Good Deed Goes Unpunished."

Lopez is married and has two sons.

## **PART TWO**

### **STEVE LOPEZ / POINTS WEST**

#### **A Corner Where L.A. Hits Rock Bottom**

**Steve Lopez**  
**Points West**

October 17, 2005

A few hours after a homeless guy named Virgil died of an overdose in the portable toilet, the blue plastic outhouse at 6th and San Julian streets was back in business. Not as a toilet, but as a house of prostitution.

Five portable toilets stand at that corner in the darkened heart of skid row. T.J. says she sometimes has a customer in each of them - a john in every john - and scurries from one to the next, taking care of business.

"I run this corner," says the stocky 52-year-old woman, whose initials stand for Thick and Juicy. "I'm the madam, and those are the cathouses."

T.J., who keeps her wardrobe in one of the outhouses and changes every few hours, is wearing a sheer red top, nothing underneath, and skin-tight black pants. She's bummed a Newport and has it to her lips, but can't find a light.

As she speaks, a rat skitters up from the sewer and through a grate, past a discarded brassiere, a smooshed apple and an empty bag of Fritos. Rats run into, under and around the portable toilets with a brazen sense of entitlement, as comfortable as house pets.

Sights like this are common on L.A.'s skid row, a rock-bottom depository and national embarrassment. A place where disease, abuse, crime and hard-luck misery are on public display and have been for years, conveniently out of sight and mind for most Angelenos. No matter how many times I go in, I come out shocked all over again.

A couple walk past the 6th and Julian toilets now, pulling shirts up over their noses to block the stench. At times, the toilets are actually used for their intended purpose, and the unspeakable odor that envelops the corner is toxic enough to buckle your legs.

This is not the only place on skid row where business thrives in Porta-Potties. Prostitution, drug dealing and drug abuse are common in toilets across the eastern flank of downtown. The outhouses were put here to keep people from defecating on the street. Instead they provide a hiding place for crime, and urine still runs in the gutters.

"I've seen one prostitute and three guys in a Porta-Potty," says Los Angeles Police Department Capt. Andy Smith. "That's a record. Four people. I don't even want to think about what was going on in there."

The usual, no doubt. A cheap trick, a quick hit. The prostitutes aren't generally working for food or shelter, both of which are available, says Smith. They're working for drugs, and skid row is the bottom of the barrel for prostitutes - a cursed landscape that makes the darkest corners of Hollywood look glamorous by comparison.

"They're getting from \$5 to \$10 for oral sex," Smith says. "They'll brag that they're getting more, but when one of our undercover officers goes in, it's always \$5 or \$10."

Five dollars buys a crack rock, and if you doubt the power of that drug, you only have to look at what the prostitutes will do to get it.

Anyone who passes the Porta-Potties at 6th and San Julian knows what's going on. It doesn't take a detective. On a balmy night, I watch from a distance at first, moving in closer when a distress call emits from one of the stalls.

Now a thin young woman in a slinky dress is trying to wrestle someone out of the portable toilet. The woman turns to me and a photographer and pleads for us to get help.

A passerby peeks into the toilet and says the woman in distress appears to have overdone it with crack.

"It makes you hyperventilate like that," he says.

The person in trouble, it turns out, is T.J., who later swears to me she wasn't high; she was having a nervous breakdown. The slender young woman trying to yank her out of the portable toilet by her arm is her friend T.T. It stands for Tall and Tiny.

When the door opens, T.J. is wearing nothing but black underclothes. She's sitting on the lap of a man perched on the toilet, and the man's arms are wrapped around her in a bear hug. He's apparently trying to calm her down.

"She needs help!" T.T. orders, her torn corduroy dress slipping down to where it barely covers her.

I dial 911, but when paramedics arrive, T.J. has cooled off and moved into the toilet where she keeps her wardrobe. She tells them she's OK, and the paramedics leave, counting themselves lucky they didn't have to venture into an outhouse crawling with rats.

"T.J. lost her brother a while back, and her friend died here today," says T.T., who walks with a horrible limp, swinging sharp elbows to throw her emaciated body left and right. She claims she destroyed her hip playing basketball, an injury that ended her dream of a scholarship, and there wasn't much to fall back on in her broken family.

She came west from New York, quickly hit the skids, and landed on this corner four or five years ago.

"Death is part of it," T.T. says of the scene out here, which she describes as "'Escape From New York,' without Kurt Russell."

She's 24 but looks younger, with hair dyed the color of Sunny Delight and teeth white as powdered cocaine. With no warning, she suddenly loses the street-tough pose, and her body slacks as she cries big wet tears for the 9-year-old daughter she never sees.

"I never even had an ID," she says, ashamed of herself. It's as if she doesn't exist.

T.J., whom she calls Mama, seems to be the closest thing she's got to family here.

"She don't want me to die like this," T.T. says.

We cross the street to get away from the distraction of steady business. T.T. stops and leans

against a wall outside the Midnight Mission. She sees a family approaching.

"Kids!" T.T. yells for all to hear, down the street and around the corner.

That's so anyone smoking crack or shooting up will take cover, says T.T.'s friend Molly. You've got to watch out for the kids, so they don't see too much out here.

When T.T. walks away, Molly talks about the working girls on skid row who are known as strawberries.

What's that? I ask.

That's what they call girls who turn tricks for the price of a rock, Molly says. Some of the girls don't just do business in those toilets, she says. They live in them.

Molly tells me she doesn't need to be here because she lives "in a castle" in Monrovia.

Then why is she here?

Because everything you need is here, she says.

"I'm a heroin addict."

Before midnight, T.J. emerges from her outhouse wearing the see-through top and a snappy black brim. She's flashing seven rings, a bracelet and a necklace.

Not a good day, she says. Virgil, the guy who O.D.'d earlier, was a good friend. Some of the men are just lonely, she says, and she takes them into the toilets to cheer them up, listen to their stories or share a smoke.

"I'm not a prostitute," she claims, playing coy. "I give God's word in there 99.9% of the time. Of course, there are those occasions ..."

And on those occasions, her portable toilet serves as "the head office" of her bustling enterprise, T.J. tells me. T.T. is second in command, she adds, because "she thinks like me."

What do you do if the johns get rough? I ask.

She yells out "Daddy," T.J. says, and a big bouncer comes hauling up San Julian Street, where, generally speaking, heroin addicts encamp on one side of the street and crack addicts on the other.

T.J. also has gangbangers watching her back, she claims. Not that she needs cover. Some call her Little Miss Tyson, she boasts.

It all began five years ago, by her accounting. She drove out from Ohio with a beau who got drunk, the rotten snake, and dumped her on skid row, never to be seen again. T.J. did what she had to. She's a survivor, a pro.

She runs this corner.

T.J.'s chief associate is now limping into the street and calling out to a regular as he walks by.

"Hey, baby," T.T. sings, trying to lure him into her lair.

At least two of the toilets are in action, with someone bumping the inside walls of the one next to T.J.'s. A middle-aged gent is taking a young woman by the hand now and leading her into another toilet.

"That's my daughter," T.J. says proudly.

Your real daughter?

"No, that's what I call my girls."

I ask T.J. if it's true she lives in the outhouse.

No way, she says. She's got an apartment in Inglewood.

But sure, if it's late or she's tired, she stays in the portable toilet. Maybe 15 days out of a month, she sleeps in there. Why not? She's got a pillow in there and all the comforts, she says, letting me poke my head in for a tour.

"This is my closet," she says, pointing out some clothes and a hanger on one wall. "That's my library over there."

I see two books, including a Bible.

She's even got a stereo, and T.J. flips it on to show off the wrap-around sound.

The rats don't bother her, T.J. says. Sometimes they'll pop in as if they're her roommates.

"They're cute," she says.

How does she sleep in such tight quarters? I ask.

You pile the clothes over the toilet for bedding, T.J. says, and then curl up sideways.

Or you roll onto your back, prop your feet up on the wall and close your eyes, home sweet home.

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