

THE STORY OUR WAY

The media coverage of the murder of two lesbians in Portland was dehumanizing to us all by Elizabeth Crane

I was watching the evening news with my girlfriend when the story of the murder of two women in a Portland bar was reported. My girlfriend and I made instant eye contact, an unspoken understanding that this story was relevant to our lives. Tragically, it was reported that Octavia (Jacqueline) Anderson and Barbara Gilpin were shot Tuesday evening, Feb. 24, by Eric Walter Running, a man known as a friend to both women.

Anderson and Gilpin were longtime lovers and partners. Like many of us, they had a real relationship with ups and downs, petty disagreements, and a deep and abiding connection and love for each other. One friend who knew Gilpin since elementary school remembered fondly her identity as a butch—independent and self-reliant. I worked with Anderson on a Lesbian Community Project event. I remember her as a high femme—bold and beautiful.

As best as can be pieced together, Anderson was in the Ambassador Restaurant bar on Northeast 47th Avenue and Sandy Boulevard playing pool and visiting with Running. There was a disagreement between them and Running left. Anderson called Gilpin to come for her. When Running returned to the bar, Gilpin had arrived and tried to stop him from confronting Anderson. He shot her twice with a shotgun. Running then

approached Anderson in another part of the bar and shot her twice without hesitation. Both women received wounds to the head and torso.

Following on the heels of this crime came news reports describing Anderson as a "bearded lady." Media monitors have established that virtually all electronic media picked up the Associated Press lead and ran with it. Many heard of the crime for the first time by seeing the "bearded lady" trailers during the Grammy Awards show Wednesday evening. Since the story broke, community members have challenged the media regarding its coverage.

At first the stations in question defended the coverage by saying that it was inherent to the story—a mistaken identity shooting—that Running meant to shoot a man. This is false. Running, Anderson and Gilpin all knew each other. Anderson was wearing a dress and heels, as was her way. There was never a time when she was mistaken for a man.

The news reporters did a superficial investigation of the lives of these two women. There were no photos, no interviews with family,

friends or co-workers. Stories focused on the "stormy" nature of their relationship and that Gilpin sometimes confronted men who showed attention to Anderson. How horrible for a butch to confront men showing inappropriate and unwelcome attention to a femme!

The next wave broke Friday morning, when Running was found at a construction site with his throat cut. A grisly, macabre chapter in an already exceptionally violent story with so much overkill. He survived the wound and has been arraigned on two counts of aggravated murder. (According to Portland Police Bureau spokesman Lt. Cliff Madison, Running will not tell police whether his injury was self-inflicted or the result of an attack.)

As I have listened to my friends talk about the murders, the media and the community's response, I have heard many painful insights and comments.

Katharine Babad, a proud, beautiful, bearded femme received a call from elderly relatives in Toronto early on Thursday morning, worried that the story referred to her. She called other family members to assure them she was safe. My girlfriend spoke to a straight woman ally in San Francisco who said, "Oh yes, that bearded woman story, I know about that..."

I want to tell the story this way, our way, to contradict the misogynist and homophobic coverage of the mainstream media. Anderson and Gilpin had

the stories of their lives and deaths ridiculed and marginalized. The media should have told us that Gilpin was a hero for standing up to protect the woman she loved and who loved her. It should have told us that Anderson was the victim of murder and media-baiting commercialism.

It has been a week of heightened fear and trauma for lesbians in Portland. The coverage of these women's deaths dehumanized lesbians and marginalized the violence directed toward us because of our sexual orientation and our gender.

So, I'm going home to my sweet butch girlfriend, who stands up with me against unwanted attention. I am going to kiss her good night and count the many blessings of the women in my life who are special, and different and brave. I never would have guessed this would happen to anyone I knew.

When my sadness and fear pass, I will get down my heels and put on a little dress, dab perfume on all my places and go out into the world and take my space.

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