

In order to turn the murdered soldier Barry Winchell into a martyr for gay rights, activists first had to turn his girlfriend, Calpernia Addams, back into a man.

An Inconvenient C W Woman

By David France

Calpernia Sarah Addams has just rebuffed two handsome men (and a not-so-handsome one) who offered her compliments as she hurried across Union Street in Nashville. "Libertine gentlemen," she says, with a sideways slice of her green eyes. Short braids dangling on her shoulders make her look like Dorothy Gale, only taller. "We have a certain decorum here in the South, so I just said thank you and turned away," she explains. Still, she can't help being buoyed by their attentions. "I know I don't look my best. I've just been through so much lately."

One morning last fall, thick in the worst of it, Addams twisted her hair in a chignon, smoothed on a simple gray suit and made the hourlong trip from Nashville to the Fort Campbell Army base on the Tennessee-Kentucky border. There, two soldiers would stand accused in the murder of the only man she has openly loved in her 29 years. Barry Winchell, a 21-year-old private first class, died in what the base command at first labeled a "physical altercation," a common fight. It became clear Winchell was killed for being gay.

His death and the ensuing trials have become the most celebrated indictment of Congress's policy on gays in the military, known as "don't ask, don't tell, don't pursue, don't harass." Even the president called "this last brutal beating death" proof that the measure he signed into law in 1993 to protect lesbian and gay soldiers is a clear failure. Of 71,570 soldiers surveyed, 80 percent said they have witnessed derogatory

Photograph by Jeff Riedel





So he returned with Winchell and several other soldiers to show them his discovery.

The indelible performer was Calpernia Addams. Her act, a kind of Elvira-meets-Joan Jett extravaganza, involves loud rock 'n' roll, a great deal of strutting and shimmering and a scant sum of clothing. She has a certain Gypsy Rose Lee quality of vulnerability. Her fans flank the catwalk in waves to offer her folded dollar bills, sometimes by the fistful.

It was no different for the soldiers that night. They sat at a table near the stage and whooped good-naturedly throughout her act. Addams visited them during a break after the 11 p.m. set.

She says she talked to Barry Winchell last because he was so shy, but immediately fell victim to his pretty eyes and silly laugh. He told her he had never met a drag performer before, but was always "curious about such things." Somehow, they approached the topic of a date for later in the week. "At the start, I guess I was a bit more aggressive than he was," she admits.

Wayne Mayfield, who performs at another Nashville bar as Kimmie Satin, adds, "You could tell there was a girl and a boy and you could tell which was which and he was just happy as all get-out to be with her."

For Addams it was a dream come true. "Among the transgendered women here in Nashville, we have a jaded understanding of 'the way it is,'" she says. "And one of the cold hard facts that we understand is that a lot of the straight men who are attracted to us are actually closeted gay and they may not even have admitted it to themselves. We bring them into the gay community and introduce them to people and they start to get comfortable, and the next little step is that they leave us behind and start dating men. It's really lonely.

"But Barry? Barry just seemed to take me at face value. He liked me for me, as much as that sounds like a cliché. He thought I was beautiful and he enjoyed our sex life totally. The sexual-reassignment surgery, he seemed totally like

Barry Winchell, killed for being gay, wasn't really gay — at least not in the traditional Harvey Fierstein sense of the word. He was in love with a pre-operative transsexual, part male and part female, falling into the gray in-between.

respect of other Delta Company soldiers, who gave him the nickname Top Gun because of his facility with the .50-caliber machine gun. By the time of his death, he had been nominated for Soldier of the Month, his mother says.

Still, he did not immediately fit in. He had trouble putting up with his roommate, a volatile drinker with emotional problems from Lincoln, Neb., named Justin Fisher, 27, who liked to bully Winchell with impunity. Nevertheless, it was Fisher who took Winchell to his first gay bar in March of last year. The Connection, in the pure show-biz tradition of Nashville, bills itself as the largest gay bar in North America. It is mammoth, encompassing a discotheque, a two-stepping room, a gift shop, a restaurant and a cavernous performance arena for over-the-top, lip-synching drag spectaculars.

Justin Fisher had been there before. On weekend nights, clutches of soldiers and straight couples mix in easily with the show's pansexual audiences, which can swell to 2,000. Back on base afterward, Fisher had extolled the realness of one of the Connection's drag queens, whose towering beauty, according to testimony, he found so unbelievably stunning.

They fell into an easy affair. Winchell brought almost no philosophy or gender theory to this relationship. He considered his girlfriend to be a woman, yet considered himself gay for sleeping with her, friends of Winchell's say. "He wasn't really torn or tortured about those things, and once he felt comfortable with me, our sexuality together was very easy," Addams says. Addams would introduce him as heterosexual, but he would always correct her, saying, "It's O.K."

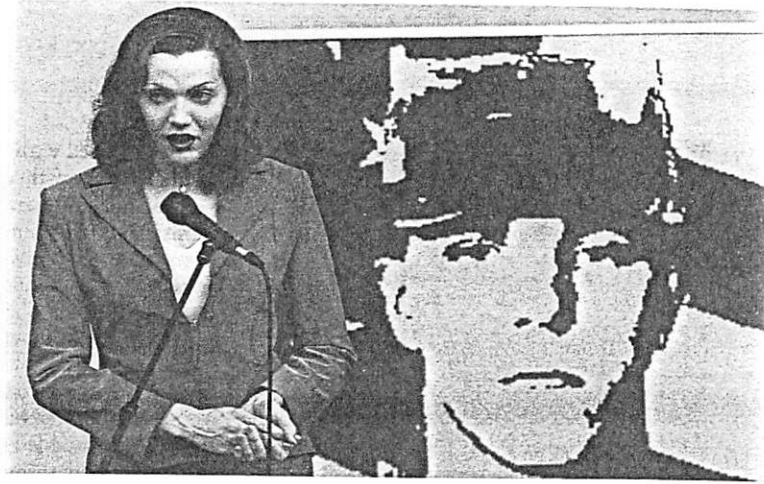
"They were very attached to each other," says Mike McCoy, a friend of both from local gay bars. "Wherever he was, you wouldn't find her too far behind. Just like an ordinary couple would be."

Winchell spent weekend evenings on the floor of Addams's dressing room, beneath a Vesuvius of crinoline and fake fur, studying his manuals while she performed — a case of beer Winchell brought still sits beside a rack of clothing in the tiny, dusty room. After the show, they would rent videos or go downtown for coffee. Among their friends from the Connection, especially other performers, their love affair was taking on a celebrated character. "Oh, she was happy," says Regine Phillips, a transgendered performer. "It was kind of like a movie." Kim

he didn't care whether that happened or not. I felt comfortable that he wasn't going to use me as a bridge. I finally was able to really let myself relax and accept his love."

"IT'S IRONIC I'M A SHOWGIRL," ADDAMS ALLOWS in her dressing room before going on one evening. "I grew up strictly forbidden to dance or bowl or roller-skate, forbidden from swimming in mixed-sex pools or staying out on a Saturday night. I was quiet and sensitive. I never lisped really, and I never said 'Girl!' or 'Miss Thing,' and I didn't like Madonna or do a lot of this" — she cocks her head from shoulder to shoulder and throws her snapping hand in the air. "I wasn't a stereotypical queen. I was just like a quiet, sensitive person who wrote poetry and walked in the woods and played violin and stuff. I wasn't delicate, really, but I wasn't really boyish. I think I just wasn't anything. I was so busy concealing everything that I just came out as a blank."

In pictures, Addams is a skinny, dark-haired boy with wide eyes and an ethereal comportment — unless he consciously forced his hands to stay in his lap, Addams says now, they seemed to float in the air when he spoke. None-



As a shy male growing up (left), Calpernia Addams seemed a very unlikely candidate for a stage career, or for gender dysphoria. Above: When her boyfriend became a gay martyr, Addams had to perform on a different stage.

theless he looked all boy, not androgynous in the least. Inside was a different thing. He had crushes on other little boys, and was jealous of every girl he knew, starting when he was 6.

He knew something was different about him — he often awoke shrieking in terror, convinced that he was mandated for hell. He suspected homosexuality, but had no inkling of gender dysphoria. He suffered from a crippling body-image problem: he often skipped school because he couldn't stand to be looked at and wrote in his notebook over and over again, "I'm so ugly."

Sensing that to survive he needed to get away, Addams joined the Navy after high school and, ignoring his desires, served happily as a combat medic in Al-Jubail in Saudi Arabia during the gulf war. The other soldiers accepted him. But his recurring struggle with depression eventually led him to a Navy psychologist, who warned him up front not to discuss any issue that might get him shipped out on a gay discharge.

It wasn't until he finished his tour and returned to Nashville in 1994 that he visited his first gay bar — the Connection — and saw his first drag queens. "I just thought I had never seen anybody that pretty in real life before," Addams recalls. "And I couldn't hardly believe they were boys. And when I found that out, I thought, If they can do that, I can do that."

Encased in shimmering organza and garish drag makeup for the club's Wednesday amateur night, something wholly unexpected happened. A heavy weight lifted. Dressed as a woman, Addams no longer suffered crushing self-hatred. As if by force of an explosion, she came to believe that she had never been a man, not in her soul.

"I realized that moment that I have to either choose to live through the constricted filter of a man's body, or else to try to change that body as much as I could to reflect what I wanted to be, and what I feel like I am," she says. She began hormone treatments in 1997 and embarked on her resculpting a year later. A final surgery, which will physically and legally make her a

woman, is something Addams plans to undertake three or four years down the line.

ADDAMS HAD ONLY BEGUN FEELING COMFORTABLY female about the time Winchell and Fisher first came to take in her performance. But all of this postmodern gender parsing was pretty well lost back on base. According to testimony, which the S.L.D.N. has synopsisized (Army transcripts have not been released), Justin Fisher's mood, usually foul, grew malignant in the days that followed his trip. That week, Fisher told Sgt. Michael Kleifgen, a section leader, that a soldier whose name he wouldn't reveal was gay. Sergeant Kleifgen began an investigation, in direct violation of "don't ask, don't tell." When he zeroed in on Winchell, he asked him point-blank if he was gay. Winchell denied it, and the probe went no further.

But Fisher also informed other Delta Company soldiers, and Barry Winchell became the target of ceaseless hostilities. "Pretty much everybody in the company called him derogatory names," Sergeant Kleifgen told the court (a base spokeswoman would not make him available and calls to his house went unanswered). "Basically, they called him a 'faggot' and stuff like that, I would say, on a daily basis. A lot of times, he was walking around down in the dumps." The Pentagon is expected to issue a report on Fort Campbell's command climate this summer.

J. Cortland Torres, 24, a gay Fort Campbell soldier and friend of Winchell's who, fearing for his own safety, requested a discharge after the murder, describes the base culture as a "Lord of the Flies" of anti-gay fever. "I honestly think that if the Army didn't promote this hatred of gays, this wouldn't have happened."

Winchell probably did not know Fisher was behind it at first — in fact, he had every reason to believe Fisher was among the most accepting of his unusual romantic situation. The two returned to the Connection together on several weekends. One night, according to Addams, Fisher asked her to fix him up with Kim Wayne

Mayfield, who was in full Kimmie Satin drag. Beneath the makeup, Mayfield, 32, is all man. Fisher knew this, Mayfield says, and it didn't seem to deter him. "He flirted with me for several weeks after that, and I flirted back," Mayfield recalls.

Ultimately, according to Mayfield, the two groped one another in the dark confines of an after-hours club and talked about an affair, which never did happen. According to testimony, Fisher bragged to another soldier that they had made out. In another wrinkle, last May Fisher stood over Winchell as he slept and fondled his feet, according to Addams. "When Barry told me about that, he just thought it was very weird," she recalls. "He was like, 'What the hell are you doing?' and Fisher said, 'Oh, I'm just drunk, I'm sorry.'"

Whether or not these near-dalliances made Fisher gay, they definitely placed him in a distant sector of the continuum that the feminist Judith Butler calls the "gender matrix." A forensic psychiatrist who examined Fisher, Keith Caruso, says the soldier suffers from something he calls "transvestic fetishism," meaning that for sexual titillation and psychological succor, Fisher has turned to wearing women's underwear, and to those who share his fancy, since he was 14.

Why, then, would he foment hostilities against Winchell? Rhonda White, from the Tennessee gay rights group, blames that least understood beast, internalized homophobia. But maybe by announcing Winchell's secret to the world, Fisher was testing the waters for what might happen if his own secrets were to slip out — nothing good, as was instantly apparent.

Or perhaps, as his lawyer Michael Love argues, Fisher's psychoses were entirely unrelated to homophobia, the similarities between these lives utterly coincidental. Indeed, Fisher has been given diagnoses of narcissistic personality disorder, attention deficit/hyperactivity disorder, robust alcoholism and mild depression.

Throughout the spring of 1999, Fisher called Winchell derogatory names. He found an aggressive co-conspirator in a newcomer to Delta

Justin Fisher asked Calpernia Addams to set him up with Kim Wayne Mayfield, who performs in drag as Kimmie Satin. 'He flirted with me for several weeks after that, and I flirted back,' Mayfield recalls.

Company, Pvt. Calvin Glover, 19, an excessive drinker from a fractured Oklahoma family. Having been intermittently homeless before joining the Army, Glover had met gay teenagers in his hometown, but had not shown any animosity toward them, says Cynthia Brown, former director of the Ada Youth Shelter in Ada, Okla. "I didn't see him being homophobic," she says. "He doesn't have that kind of malice."

Regardless, Glover became Winchell's chief tormenter, admitting that he picked a fight with Winchell on Saturday, July 3, at the start of a three-day keg party on base celebrating the long weekend — heavy drinking was common on Ft. Campbell, even among minors like Glover. Glover taunted and humiliated Winchell throughout the afternoon. Finally, when he reached to knock a beer out of the gay soldier's hand, Winchell had enough. He threw Glover to the ground, hitting him several times. Most of the other soldiers applauded the outcome. But Fisher would not let it drop. He taunted Glover for getting "beat by a faggot," according to testimony. "A faggot cannot kick my [expletive]," Glover reportedly hollered as Winchell skulked off to bed. "I could [expletive] kill you!"

The drinking continued the following evening. By all accounts, Glover had at first buried the hatchet and played Wiffle ball with Winchell. Back in Nashville that same night, Calpernia Addams was competing in the biggest pageant of her career, the Tennessee Entertainer of the Year Contest, taking on the outsize personalities of drag queens, transvestites, transsexuals and transgendered stage legends from across the state. Donning a beaded black pantsuit, she lip-synched to Sinead O'Connor's haunting rendition of "Don't Cry for Me Argentina" while actually playing the violin riffs herself. At 2:30 that morning, judges balanced a tiara on her head and named Addams the best in the state.

At precisely the same time, Fisher and Glover were drinking beer in Fisher's room and listening to the soundtrack from "Psycho." Glover picked up a bat and went to a hall where Winchell was sleeping on a cot.

Winchell never woke up. Glover swung the bat five or six times with such ferociousness that parts of Winchell's brain extruded through his left ear, according to testimony. Blood covered the walls and ceilings, splashing 15 feet down the hall.

Addams rushed home to call Winchell with her great news, but there was no answer. She would learn the devastating truth the next afternoon, from the television. To this day, she blames herself. "The reason he was killed was because he was dating me," she says. "That makes it even more devastating, to think that I had played some role in it."

Among the first things Addams did was to develop the one roll of film with pictures of the two of them together. But the film had been ruined somehow, and the pictures were black, a final cruelty that she still despairs. She now has only a few photographs that Winchell gave her from his childhood; she wrapped up the rest and sent them back to his parents. She included a small picture of herself. It had already hit the papers that Winchell had been dating "a drag queen" from a Nashville club, and Addams hoped to prepare Winchell's parents for the sordid coverage. "Just to settle your mind, this is me," she put in an accompanying note. "I tried to be a good person, and I just hope that you can find it in your heart not to hate me."

Winchell's mother, Patricia Kutteles, a psychiatric nurse from Kansas City, Mo., knew only that her son was dating a dancer from Nashville, which saddens her, given that in her liberal household homosexuality was discussed and accepted. Perhaps, she thinks, this indicates he was simply in a passing phase. "When I found out Calpernia was a transsexual or whatever, that was a bit surprising," she says. "But she is a very nice person, and she really cared about Barry. Knowing he was in a happy relationship, in the end, that helped. When we talked, he was just so optimistic about his future."

Addams and Kutteles have spoken once, briefly, on the telephone. They had agreed to meet one afternoon during Glover's court-martial. (Glover got a life sentence; Fisher, who washed the blood from the bat, got 12 years in a plea bargain.) But Addams canceled. "I just felt I did not have the strength to show myself to this woman," Addams explains. "I don't want to make myself sound like Florence Nightingale, but if only one group of people gets to have the help and attention, then certainly I would have it be Barry's parents."

AT A FUND-RAISING COCKTAIL PARTY FOR THE S.L.D.N. in a 190-year-old historic Nashville

farmhouse, Calpernia Addams is filling a plate with roasted pork loin and steamed shrimp dumplings. Earlier in the day, Addams was not sure she would attend the event. "I only found out about it after a friend forwarded me e-mail," she said then. She feels strange, being so bitterly marginalized. But she is just now beginning to allow herself room to criticize.

"I'm disappointed in a lot of ways with almost every organization that I thought would help me with this," she says. "A lot of things I don't want to go in print — speaking out against these major national gay and lesbian organizations — but a lot of them I thought would come and help me or say something, or do a press release or give me some advice. And they just didn't." But ultimately she pulled on a skin-tight tongue-pink top and a slinky red skirt that reached below her knees, and with a mist of slight Southern conceit she strode right past the donation table and over to the food.

Across the room Kathi Westcott, the S.L.D.N. staff attorney, has begun calling everyone to attention, and she asks Addams to come forward. "I am constantly amazed by her elegance and her calm and cool," Westcott announces. "Without her strength and courage I don't think we would be able to convince the press that this was a hate crime."

With that, Westcott hands Addams a framed commendation from the organization. "We commend you for your courage in ensuring justice for P.F.C. Barry Winchell," it says. "In addition your extraordinary efforts have helped force our Armed Forces to implement new rules in training to prevent anti-gay harassment and hate crimes, making the world safer for all." Addams is overcome with emotion. "That's so nice," she says in a voice so soft it is barely above a lip-synch.

But there is something in the text that snags her, or rather something that is missing. There is no mention of her loss. Its author seems no more capable of picturing her as one-half of this couple than Addams herself was when gripping those blackened photographs. The proclamation is proof that Winchell belongs to them now, no longer to her at all. "I do feel like I was an awkward element for everybody involved," Addams says several weeks later. She sounds a note of resignation. "I didn't want to be anybody's anything, really, except Barry's girlfriend. And that was already taken away from me." ■