

Rosario: Shuck the ‘grandmother’ thing in hunt for suspect in killings

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Lois Ann Riess, who is wanted in the murder of her husband, David Riess, 54, of Blooming Prairie, Minn. (Courtesy of Dodge County sheriff)

Veteran criminal profiler Pat Brown and Vernon Geberth, a former NYPD homicide squad commander who wrote the profession’s bible on murder probes, are hardly surprised about how news media and even law enforcement colleagues are choosing to describe Lois Riess, the middle-aged rural Minnesota woman and suspected spree killer on the lam.

“Nationwide hunt for grandmother accused of killing her husband,” read one headline.

“Grandmother accused of 2 murders is on the run,” read another on an online TV station site.

“Police: Alleged killer grandma on the run” screamed the CNN headline on its site.

“With her platinum-blond hair and cherubic smile, Lois Riess looks in photos like what she is — a 56-year-old grandmother from small-town America,” blared the Washington Post Tuesday.

“She smiles and looks like anyone’s mother or grandmother,” Florida Lee County Undersheriff Carmine Marceno told reporters days after the body of a “look-alike” woman Riess befriended at a Fort Myers watering hole was discovered in the victim’s rented condo. “And yet she’s calculated, she’s targeted and an absolute cold-blooded killer.”

No way. Nanas, abuelitas, babuskas whacking people? C’mon now. Blasphemous.

Grandmothers are guardian-angel beings on Earth. Mine was. They slip you a cookie or banned candy, spoil you to no end. Spice your coffee with Don Q rum to sap you awake on nippy mornings; give you real-life advice on sex and bare parent secrets that your own folks would never dare to share.

Enough already, says Brown.

“That ‘grandmother’ thing, really?” Brown, a Maryland-based profiler, said about the ongoing man (woman) hunt for Riess, 56, of Blooming Prairie. Though statistically minor compared with male counterparts, “there’s this sense that psychopaths, psychopathic older women, all of a sudden develop that way. They are pretty much that way by the time they are 5.”

“That’s a pretty bizarre case but not many realize what the female psychopath — and that’s what she is — is really capable of doing,” added Geberth. “Life means nothing to them. ... It’s basically survival,” he noted.

According to authorities, Riess shot her husband, David, 54, multiple times March 23 inside their home, killing him. The couple has three grown children and at least one grandchild. I need to express condolences here to all affected by this before I continue.

Lois Riess transferred \$10,000 from David Riess’ bait-farm business account into his personal banking account, and then she forged his signature to cash out the amount. She then took off in the couple’s 2005 white Cadillac Escalade, according to police. A chronic gambler, she siphoned at least \$78,000 as guardian for her disabled younger sister’s trust, court records indicate, though no criminal charges were ever filed. Most of the money, as alleged in court papers, was used to gamble.

Dodge County lawmen later tracked her whereabouts after the slaying of her husband to a casino in Iowa. Then came April 9, when authorities in Fort Myers discovered the body of Pamela Hutchinson, 59, inside her rented condo. She had been shot in the heart at close range — reportedly with the same caliber gun used to kill David Riess.

Authorities uncovered a brief but revealing seven-second video showing Riess conversing with Hutchinson, five days before the discovery of Hutchinson’s body, during

happy hour at a bar. Authorities believe Riess targeted Hutchinson because she resembled her and then sought to assume Hutchinson's identity to evade authorities.



The Lee County (Fla.) sheriff's office released surveillance video Tuesday, April 17, 2018, of Lois Riess at a Hilton Hotel in Ocala. Riess is wanted for the killing of her husband, David Riess, in Blooming Prairie, Minn. (Courtesy of Lee County sheriff)

Riess is believed to have ditched the Escalade in Fort Myers and fled in Hutchinson's car. It is believed the car was spotted in Louisiana and, most recently, near Corpus Christi, Texas. There are concerns Riess may have or be heading to Mexico to evade capture.

She may be the most well-publicized fugitive with a Minnesota connection since Andrew Cunanan 21 years ago.

Cunanan killed four men — two in Minneapolis, one in Chicago and another in New Jersey, before he gunned down famed fashion designer Gianni Versace outside his South Beach mansion. Cunanan took his own life eight days later inside a houseboat as authorities closed in on the elusive fugitive. Books, movies and recent cable series chronicled Cunanan's cross-country killing spree.

"There is some parallel," Brown acknowledged. "But this is not Cunanan right now."

Riess has not yet, and thankfully, made the FBI's Most Wanted list. Cunanan did only after the Versace slaying. Although U.S. marshals are reportedly involved in the multistate search, the local FBI on Tuesday did not confirm any involvement and referred all calls about Riess to the Dodge County sheriff's office or the state's Bureau of Criminal Apprehension. The local and national FBI agencies were all over the Cunanan search from the early stages.

Brown believes Riess will become more dangerous to folks she encounters as she runs out of resources to pay for gas, food or shelter.

Brown believes heading to Mexico would be Riess' undoing unless she can blend into the ex-pat communities there without detection. But ex-pat American communities and tourist hot spots south of the border, Brown presumes, along with U.S. and Mexican border patrol and police agencies, have probably already been alerted.

Geberth, of all people, reminded me of the loss of life that may be forgotten or overshadowed by the ongoing hunt and attention surrounding a killer.

"Look, nothing surprises me anymore," he told me. "I've seen too much. But I feel bad for the victim. I mean victims here, not only the woman she may have killed to steal her identity. But her husband also ... "



Rubén Rosario

From smoking crack in a Harlem drug den for a front-page exposé to covering the deaths of 86 people in a Bronx social club fire, Rubén Rosario spent 11 years as a writer for the New York Daily News before joining the Pioneer Press in 1991 as special correspondent and city editor. He launched his award-winning column in 1997. He is by far the loudest writer in the newsroom over the phone.

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