

The Pyjama Girl Mystery

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The discovery of a burnt and bludgeoned young woman formed a mystery spanning 30 years of Australian history.

The birth of a child is something to be celebrated. The birth of a healthy baby, perhaps more so. In September 1905, that's all Linda Platt was – a healthy, celebrated baby born to middle class parents in Forest Hill, London.

But Linda Platt would become so much more than that.

In her early life, Linda Platt was extraordinarily ordinary. She attended school no doubt, received an education. She had a job selling confectionary in Surrey and she lived a relatively comfortable life with her parents in London.

It's her adult life that becomes audaciously scandalous.

Embodying the Jazz generation, the celebrated 'young and the free', Linda moved to New Zealand in 1924. She was nineteen years old. It may have been in attempt to escape a broken engagement or in search of employment options. Regardless of her reasons, three years later in 1927, Linda relocated to Sydney, Australia.

The Great South Land of opportunity. The red sands of a new colony, a new life. The Land Down Under. Australia. Her final resting place.

Linda found work at the local picture theatre in Kings Cross, Sydney. Linda was proud, pretty and popular. A winning combination of intelligent wit and flirtatious style, hidden in deep brown eyes below thick brows and above shapely, full lips. Linda was noticeable – particularly by the young, attractive Jazz Age men she so frequently entertained in her boarding house room on Darlinghurst Road.

The circumstances leading to her marriage with Italian-born Antonio Agostini are unclear. Perhaps Antonio preferred it that way. Held in the Sydney registry office sometime in 1930, the wedding was undoubtedly small and the marriage unhappy. Soon after their union, Antonio moved his new wife to Melbourne, to take her away from her Jazz Age parties and heavy drinking. A subtle form of

imprisonment for anyone who had enjoyed the kind of lifestyle Linda Platt had become accustomed to.

By Antonio's orchestration, Linda's friends in Sydney lost contact with her. They didn't know where she was or what her life had become.

Until her face made the headline news in late 1934.

Tom Griffith broke the story on the night of August 27th, 1934. In an era that saw no wrong in doing so, he made the discovery whilst walking his prize bull along the Howlong Road.

Tom saw a partially hidden, charred package in a culvert running alongside the road. Upon closer inspections, Tom found the grotesque remains of a petite young woman, parcelled and packaged headfirst in a hessian bag, as if for some gruesome ritual delivery.

Perhaps the body would not have been noticed by the passing traffic. Perhaps a casual observer would not have thought much of the human-sized parcel hidden in the bushes. But for a man straddling a hungry animal, the discovery was inevitable. Inevitably horrific.

The blistered remains of the body inside the hessian bag were identifiable only by the silk pyjamas she wore. A luxury item worn by the fashionable modern women. Fashionable in life, fashionable in death.

She was immediately identified as Anna Philomena Morgan.

'Franki' Morgan lived in Darlinghurst. Her occupation, though officially unknown, pulled a fair wage judging by the up-market company she kept. Records tell little of her personal life, except for the confronting detail that at the time of her death, Franki was being treated for syphilis. Her occupation, perhaps, was too shameful to be officially recognised.

The similarities between Franki and Linda were strong. Short dark hair, fair skin, thick straight eyebrows.

But no. Franki was not the Pyjama Girl.

Franki – known better to her clients as “Stiletto Jean” – had already been found in 1932 by an electrician unfortunate enough to service her building in Ayr, Queensland – some 2,000 km and two years prior to the discover of the Pyjama Girl.

Dressed only in a silk nightgown – the apparent uniform of her profession – she had been stabbed thirty-two times. The crime was never solved, but rumoured to be the work of her disgruntled customers, Vincenzo D'Agostino and Francisco Femico, leaders of the infamous Northern Queensland crime syndicate, the ‘Black Hand’ gang.

No. Anna Philomena ‘Franki’ Morgan was not the Pyjama Girl. And so the search continued.

Conflicting evidence from two separate investigations in 1934 and 1944 confounded police. She was Anna Philomena Morgan, second guessed, maybe it was Linda Agostoni. No. It couldn't be. Linda had brown eyes, the Pyjama Girl had blue eyes.

Franki Morgan had blue eyes. No, it wasn't her. She was Stiletto Jean. The questions continued for the next decade, searching for the silver-bullet solution.

As of 1934, the Pyjama Girl found her new home in a bath of formalin inside the University Of Sydney's Medical School. She became an international spectacle. Stripped of her identity and dignity, but not her mysterious charm.

Entombed in her public mausoleum, like a grotesque depiction of some forgotten ancient battle. A personal giganomarchy, on display for all the world to judge.

“Witnesses had said that the body was Linda earlier, but police had been misled by inaccurate dental records.” Historian Bruce Pennay speaks softly, as if risking disclosure of contraband secrets over a tapped phone. He's convinced the body was that of Linda Agostini who met her death as a result of an unfortunate accident.

Who was the Pyjama Girl? There's no question. She was Linda Agostini, a migrant English hairdresser married to Tony Agostini. That is the answer if you were to ask Bruce Pennay.

Her death was a horrible accident, orchestrated by fate alone. During a lover's quarrel one night and in attempt to secure her safety, Tony wrestled a hand gun from his desperate wife. It discharged and delivered the fatal hit.

How did her body come to its final resting place, beaten and partially burnt in a hessian bag 330km away from their Melbourne home? Well, that was all Tony's desperate attempt to dispose of the evidence.

So that's that then. Linda Agostini – the Pyjama Girl – was unfortunately killed by her husband.

When police made the discovery and began to inquire about Mrs. Agostini's sudden disappearance, Tony claimed he had no knowledge of her whereabouts because she had left him.

And so it remained until 1944 when the coroner began reviewing photographs of Linda Agostini. The freckles on her upper arms did not only match those of the victim's but also miraculously survived the evidence-cleansing fire. The jig was up for Tony who was charged with manslaughter and extradited in 1944.

In life, had the Pyjama Girl walked the same street as Linda Agostini, few would stop to see their likeness. The similarities were not immediately apparent.

The Pyjama Girl was in her mid-20s. She was just over five feet tall with a slight figure. She had blue eyes. X-rays revealed that her right eye socket had been shattered by the bullet's entry. But she had died from blunt force sustained from eight heavy blows to the face.

Linda Agostini was a full-figured woman. She stood at roughly 5 feet 4 inches. The dental records did not match. Linda Agostini had two porcelain fillings that were not found on the Pyjama Girl. And her eyes were brown.

The eyes are the window to a person's identity.

Arthur Burkitt, a professor of anatomy at the University of Sydney, did the autopsy upon the body's delivery in 1934.

"He made continual reference at the beginning about her eye colour being blue indicating that she had no Aboriginal heritage and likely wasn't an immigrant." Dr Richard Evans speaks passionately about the Pyjama Girl – as if he has known her personally and seeks retribution for a long since forgotten injustice.

Author of the 2004 true crime investigation *The Pyjama Girl Mystery*, Evans would bet his career on it. The Pyjama Girl was not Linda Agostini.

“He said that the eye colour may have changed after she died considering the head injuries and burning the body was subjected to.”

Dr Evans adopts a somewhat disparaging tone when talking about the inconsistencies in Arthur Burkitt’s stories. “He had twenty-seven years experience. If anyone could, he knew blue eyes when he saw them.”

Between the two inquiries in 1934 and 1944, something changed Burkitt’s mind.

“One thing that was well-known about Mackay was the he was not above blackmail.” Dr Evans’ tone gets a resonance of anger, as if personally offended by the police constable’s incompetence.

Bill Mackay. Police constable. Head of the Australian security intelligence during World War II, where Tony Agostini had been interned for Fascist sympathies. Described by Dr Evans as both insecure and arrogant. The worst of personality traits melted into one man.

“He was known for his ability to get confessions quickly.” Dr Evans says. Mackay was known for getting quick results, enough to justify his decorated career, as long as the powers-to-be were made unaware of his methods. Or were willing to adopt a policy of don’t-ask-don’t-tell.

Why did Professor Burkitt change his statement to the court in 1944? Mackay had gotten to him. “A suggestion that he was wrong was easy enough influence for him to change his story.” Dr Evans sighs.

And then there’s the issue of pre-meditation.

The Pyjama Girl was bludgeoned, shot, driven across state borders and set alight. Her injuries were consistent with pre-meditation.

Especially if the fire was started with kerosene.

Police Sergeant Kelly was the first on the scene in 1934. He made detailed notes about the surrounds, including the strong smell of kerosene. Later, in court, the Pyjama Girl’s macabre perfume changed. It was petrol. Yes. Definitely petrol.

Because no-one would drive over 300km with a can of kerosene. Petrol was far more likely.

“The case against Agostini tried to prove that he had driven to the location where the body was found, set it alight then used the remaining petrol to fill his car.” In Dr Evans’ opinion, the difference is vital.

Kerosene means deliberation. Petrol means panic. Both are unmistakably different aromas.

If Dr Evans’ theories are correct, the police resorted to scandalous lengths to solve the Pyjama Girl mystery. And that, Dr Evans says, is the media’s fault.

Ezra Norton, editor-in-chief of the newspapers *Truth* and *The Sun* had become increasingly critical of Bill Mackay in the wake of several unsolved murders.

“The opportunity to wrap up the case was very attractive.” Dr Evans resigns to that injustice.

Antonio Agostini was a unfortunate pawn sacrificed on the chess board of Mackay’s popularity. He was railroaded by the tainted evidence and like Lee Harvey Oswald, he has become the victim of history’s need to surrender the mystery.

Untimely death is cause for bereavement. Whether Linda’s family were ever given this right to grieve, whether those left in England were ever notified of her death at all, is unknown. A bit like Linda Agostini altogether, really. Unknown.

Her mystery is all that transcends. The first of a generation of Marilyn Monroes and Barbara La Marrs, whose mysterious demise and premature death have forced the world to voyeuristic grief.

The Pyjama Girl might be Linda Agostini. She might be Anna Philomena Morgan or someone else altogether. Anthony Agostini may have killed his wife. It may have been premeditated. It may have been a crime of passion.

The only certainty that remains is the only certainty that the mystery started with. On the night of August 27th, 1934 a body of a young woman in silk pyjamas was found hidden in roadside shrubbery along the Howlong Road, close to Albury.

Somewhere in Victoria’s Preston Public Cemetery stands a headstone boldly etched with Linda Agostini’s name. But it is the Pyjama Girl that lies beneath.