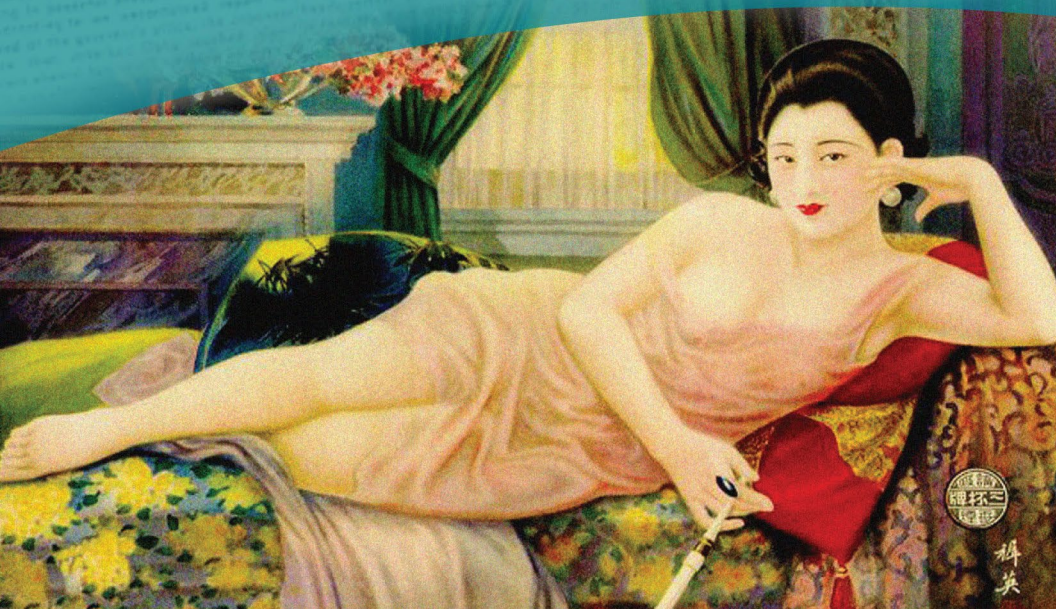


THE PEKING MAN IS MISSING

Claire Taschdjian



PROLOGUE



NEW YORK, January 27—The partly decomposed body of a middle-aged woman was discovered early this morning in the swamps of the Jamaica Bay Wildlife Refuge by two bird watchers. The woman had been strangled, and her fully clothed body stuffed into a plastic leaf bag. The Medical Examiner estimates that the woman had been dead for at least two months, although the persistent subfreezing weather has retarded decomposition. The woman is described as in her early or middle forties, 5'8", 115 pounds, red hair, hazel eyes, fair complexion. She was dressed in a blue suit, white nylon blouse and tan nylon stockings. The blouse was torn down the front but there was no evidence of a sexual attack. A badly rotted black seal coat and black fur-lined leather boots were found near the body in another leaf bag, but there was no purse. The body was removed to the City Morgue for further examination. Anyone able to identify the woman is asked to confidentially call Police at ME9-5627. (See photo.)



The photo showed the too obviously reconstituted face of a once handsome woman with short, curly hair and a thin, triangular face. The caption read: “Do you know this woman?” and repeated the invitation to impart information to the police.

Thus the *Daily News*. The *Times* apparently had not considered this news Fit to Print.

There were several people in New York City who could have identified the dead woman.

Señora Ramirez of West 126th Street had known her quite well. But the señora did not read the *Daily News*, which transcended her very limited knowledge of English. Señora Ramirez kept abreast of world affairs through *El Diario*, which, like the *Times*, had not considered the item newsworthy (“Middle-aged *gringa*, not even raped, so who the hell gives a damn?”).

Even if Señora Ramirez had possessed the necessary linguistic ability, she would certainly not have shared her knowledge with the police. Partly out of principle, but mainly because it might have meant explaining a certain twenty-one-inch TV console in her living room, the clothes with Bergdorf Goodman, Saks Fifth Avenue and Lord & Taylor labels, which looked so good on her daughter Margarita, and possibly also a Rolleiflex camera and a portable typewriter that had brought fifty-eight dollars at Goldman’s hockshop on West 125th Street...

The doorman of an apartment house on East End Avenue looked at the photo and mused, “Yeah, could be the poor lady...” He decided against calling police “confidentially.” Better not get involved. His duty to his family came first. What the duty to his family had to do with the dead woman

was not immediately apparent to him, but hell, the cops would make him go down to the morgue to identify a “partly decomposed” corpse that had been lying around Jamaica Bay for two months. Who needed that? Let someone else do it. Like that tall, skinny character who’d been so anxious to get hold of her forwarding address...

Unaware of the New York *Daily News’s* existence, Frau Katrin Peters, in Innsbruck, Austria, was trying to sort out her mementos into true keepsakes, to be taken to Vorarlberg, and trivia, for the trash can at her side. As is usual with such undertakings, she had got sidetracked by a box filled with old photographs. At the moment she was contemplating an eight-by-ten glossy. A square red stamp on its back said in Chinese and English: “Photography Department, Peking Medical School,” with an inked notation underneath: “March 2, 1941.”

The photograph showed a group of people posed stiffly against a carved balustrade. Frau Peters gazed fondly at the short, roly-poly figure of the Professor, front row center. This had been the last picture of him taken in Peking; a week or so later he and his wife had left for the United States. She herself stood between the Professor and tall, stooped Father Lorrain, who was smiling that sweet yet somewhat mischievous smile of his. The rest of the group were Chinese members of the staff, whose names and functions she had long since forgotten. Except Ch’en, of course, who flanked the Professor on the other side. Frau Peters wondered briefly how Ch’en had managed to survive in the People’s Republic. She decided to take the picture with her.

Frau Peters picked up a faded color print showing two tall uniformed young men—one dark, one blond—and two girls. One girl was tall, with short chestnut curls and long-lashed, slanted green eyes; the other was blue-eyed and chubby, her

round face framed by a lank brown pageboy bob. The notation on the back said: “Tom, Bill, Evvie and Kathy. Peking, September 1941.”

Frau Peters grimaced a little. Chubby then, she was now downright plump. It was a good likeness of Evvie, though. The color of her face had faded to a pale ivory, more true to the living original than the crude orangy-pink of the fresh print. Color prints were still primitive in 1941 and faded easily... Joe had taken the picture. Both Joe and Tom were dead; poor Tom! She hadn't heard from Bill Snyder or Evvie in a long time. Martin had never met any of them...

Frau Peters dropped the print into the trash can.

PART I:
THE HIJACK



Peking, China
March To December 7, 1941



“E_VVIE?”

“Hmmm...”

“Come on, Evvie, time to get up.”

“Hmmm...”

“Come on, Evvie—it’s nearly noon.”

“So? *You* come *here*, Joe.”

Two white arms emerged from under the covers and twined themselves around Joe’s neck, pulling him down. Reluctantly Joe stiffened his neck and back and began to disengage the grip of the arms.

“Not now, Evvie. I’ve got to go out. Rickshaw’s waiting.”

“Let him wait.” The arms increased their hold.

“Evvie, let go! We had all last night; we’re going to have all tonight. Give a man a chance to recharge the battery. Come on now; it’s a nice day.”

Heavily lashed lids opened halfway over slanted green eyes. “Uh...okay, Joe.” A yawn. The arms disappeared under the covers, the red-curled head snuggled deeper into the pillow. Evvie gave every indication of going back to sleep.

Joe grinned and jerked the covers off. Jabbing his finger into the bare rib cage, he said again, “Get up, you lazy slut! Don’t steal God’s beautiful day.”

“Since when have you got religion? Anyway, He’s got lots more. Oh, all right—I’ll get up, blast you.”

“Blast you,” Joe mimicked. “Don’t be so goddamn British.”

“I’m not; I’m German—remember? Where do you have to go in such a bloody hurry?”

Joe had walked over to the dresser, carefully skirting a table which occupied most of the wall space and bore a tall structure covered with a sheet. He straightened his tie and smoothed down his hair in front of the mirror. “I’m meeting Hans; have to bring him some stuff and get some more reagents. Bunch of guys going home...”

The perfectly plucked eyebrows contracted in a frown; the eyes were suddenly hard and shrewd. “Make him give you more money, Joe. With the risk you are taking... I do wish you could quit.”

Joe walked over to the bed, kissed his wife and said, “Soon, babe, but not yet. We need that dough bad.”

Evvie sighed and scowled at the shrouded contraption by the wall. “I know, Joe... Give the call of the Orient, will you?”

Joe yelled, “Amah?”

Amah bustled in, a short, dumpy figure, lacquered black hair drawn straight back into a neat bun, the hairline impeccably plucked into the perfect oval required of married women. She wore a short, starched white jacket, with a stand-up collar and frog-button fasteners, over baggy black cotton trousers. These were caught and tied at the ankle and tucked into snow-white hose, which in turn were encased in black satin slippers. In rapid, melodious Mandarin, Evvie instructed Amah to run a bath, tell Kim to prepare breakfast, and lay out the linen suit. Amah began

to pick up the various items of clothing and underwear that were strewn all over the floor. Joe watched and shook his head.

“Why can’t you pick up after yourself?”

“What are amahs for?”

“Still beats me how you jabber that lingo.”

“Well, look—after all, I was born here; Chinese was my first language. Nothing so wonderful about that.”

“Yeah; still... Tell Amah to be careful with the stuff in the bathroom and to clean up after you’ve had your bath; Kim has to set up for tonight. You got any plans for today?”

“I think I’ll walk around the Morrison Street Market, maybe have tea at the Wagons-Lits later.”

Joe said, “Okay; have fun. Don’t be home late, though. Bill is coming over tonight; he’ll probably bring Tom. Tell Kim there’ll be company for dinner.”

“Joe, I don’t really like Bill. He reminds me of a shark!”

“I know, baby, you’ve said so before. You don’t have to like him; just feed him—okay?” Joe kissed Evvie again and walked out.

Bathed, dressed and fed, Evvie left the house an hour later. Joe had been right—it was a beautiful day.

The pale-blue sky gave no hint that only yesterday it had been darkened by dirty yellow clouds composed in equal parts of dust blown in from the Gobi desert by a northwesterly gale and the local product swirled up from the unpaved hutungs—one of the periodic dust storms that dimmed the sun to a faint reddish luminescence and visibility to that of a pea-souper fog, creating darkness at noon and filling air, pores and nostrils with fine desert sand that irritated eyes and throat and gritted annoyingly between one’s teeth.

On her way home from the Grand Hôtel des Wagons-Lits, Evvie caught sight of a small, sturdy figure walking smartly

along Legation Street, brown pageboy bob swinging. Evvie accelerated. “Kathy?”

The other girl swirled around, startled. “Evvie!”

They hugged, then held each other at arm’s length in the manner of friends who have not seen each other for a long time, exclaiming simultaneously and inevitably:

“You haven’t changed a bit!”

“I didn’t know you were in Peking.”

“I’m married. I live here now.”

“Why, Evvie, that’s really *news*! Uh...not Hans von Albers, is it?”

“Hans! Don’t be bloody silly. That would be like incest, for God’s sake! No, I am Mrs. Joseph Cramer now.”

Kathy let out her breath. “And who is *Mister* Joseph Cramer? Where did you meet him?”

“Well, he is an American, he came over last year, we met at Hans’s. We’ve been married two months; we live at Nan Ho Yen.”

Kathy was impressed. Nan Ho Yen—the Southern River Bank—was Peking’s Park Avenue.

“Your Joe must be doing well. Those houses aren’t cheap.”

“Oh, we haven’t a dime. The house and furniture belong to Hans. He’s letting us have it.” Evvie deliberately changed the subject. “What about you, Kathy? I thought you were in medical school in Switzerland?”

“I was, but I quit school and tried to come home last year when Mother got so ill and Father and Mother moved to Peking so that she could get treatment at PMS. But it took so long, Evvie, with the war in Europe, and waiting endlessly for the Russian and Japanese transit visas. By the time I finally made it back, it was too late... And Father died suddenly last December; a heart attack.”

Evvie took Kathy's hand. "I'm so sorry, Kathy... But you are staying on here?"

Kathy brightened. "Well, I've got a job. I was very lucky. After Mother's death Father worked at PMS—he said his medicine had got rusty in all those years in Shantung, he needed a refresher course—and he met the Professor there, my boss, and the Professor needed a bilingual secretary, German and English, and there I was. I work at the Paleoanatomy Laboratory, Evvie—it's marvelously interesting."

"The *what* laboratory?"

"Paleoanatomy—where they are working on the Peking Man."

"The Peking Man... Oh, you mean those ancient fossils. How old are they—a million years?"

"Maybe only six hundred thousand," said Kathy with a grin.

"Well, that's old enough; anyway, it must be *fascinating*," said Evvie politely.

Kathy got carried away. "Yes, it *is* fascinating. Imagine, I am actually *handling* those fossils. Although I don't know what's going to happen now. I just saw my boss off at Chien Men Station—he and his wife are being repatriated. The embassy insisted that his wife go back to the States and he said they were too old for a separation that could be indefinite, so he went along. I don't know how the work is going to go on without him."

Evvie nodded. She was aware of the exodus of "nonessential" Americans—wives, children, the elderly—whose repatriation was urged by the U.S. Embassy in view of the ever-increasing danger of war with Japan. Joe kept talking about going home—after they'd built up a stake... What was Kathy saying?

"...But at least Father Lorrain is still in charge, and maybe

there won't be a war after all and the Professor will come back and we'll start digging again and maybe I'll even discover some fossils myself—"

Evvie cut her short. "Why not. You always were smarter than me, Kathy. I don't know how I'd ever have made it through school without you doing my chemistry and physics for me—and of course Hans to do my math assignments," she added loyally, giving credit where credit was due. "But you must tell Joe about your job. He'll be so interested. Joe knows about these things; he's a scientist."

"Is he! What kind of a scientist, Evvie?"

"Joe...he's...uh...Joe's a chemist. I say, are you doing anything special right now?"

Kathy said she had no particular plans for the rest of the day.

"Then why don't you come home with me, meet Joe, have a drink and stay for dinner?"

Walking through the eastern gate of the Legation Quarter, they reached Hatamen Street, hailed rickshaws and were swiftly borne toward Tung Chang Ang Chieh, the southernmost of the four broad thoroughfares that enclosed the square Imperial City.

The late afternoon was still pleasantly warm and the rickshaw coolies had shed their long padded gowns, which lay neatly folded at their passengers' feet. The coolies' bare brown backs glistened with sweat as they trotted along Tung Chang Ang Chieh. The air was filled with the sounds and smells of Peking: the cries, chants and clappers of the street vendors; the spicy aroma of their wares mingling with the undefinable smell of dust, open sewers, camel dung and incense which characterized the city in the spring. Small donkeys clop-clopped along, carrying one or more riders of either or both sexes, or pulling

two-wheeled, blue-canopied carts that conveyed apparently limitless numbers of passengers. Rickshaw coolies shouted cheerfully to one another. The radios in the open street stalls were blaring a commercial for cod liver oil, delivered in a fruity belly voice that seemed to slither with the product it recommended. The street sounds merged with the flutelike piping of reed whistles tied to the tail feathers of pigeons that rose and dipped in silvery flocks in the blue hazy sky over the dark evergreens and distant golden roofs of the Forbidden City.

The gently rocking motion of the rickshaw in the balmy, multi-scented spring breeze was conducive to meditation and free flow of thought. In view of their unexpected reunion, Kathy and Evvie naturally thought about each other and about the beginning of their somewhat incongruous friendship.

They were as disparate in looks and personality as a race horse and a Clydesdale, Evvie having the pale fragility of an ivory figurine, Kathy with the sturdy body and apple cheeks of a Swiss peasant girl. Evvie could and did eat like a horse, never losing her look of elegant emaciation; Kathy had to watch her diet. Evvie draped in a towel managed to look like a Vogue cover girl; Kathy appeared rugged and wholesome no matter what she wore. Evvie's hair, naturally curly and the color of richly polished mahogany, was cut in an artless short crop; Kathy's limp brown hair would not hold a wave even in the dry climate of North China.

Evvie relished night life and detested outdoor activity in any form; Kathy swam, played tennis and ice-skated, and despised late nights and the smoke-filled air of nightclubs.

However, these differences tended to facilitate their friendship, since neither girl threatened competition for the other.

Their initially forced association was brought about by similar, heavily middle-class European backgrounds.

Katrin Ewers' parents had been medical missionaries who had joined a small British mission hospital some two hundred miles inland of the Chinese Treaty Port of Tientsin when Kathy was just learning to talk. Growing up at the mission, Kathy quickly became trilingual, effortlessly speaking Chinese with the servants and her playmates, guttural Swiss German with her parents, and British-accented "China Coast English" at the mission's elementary and grammar schools.

After completing grammar school, Kathy was sent to the German school in Tientsin for the four-year course that would qualify her for study at a Swiss or German university.

The Zimmermanns were happy to welcome their Evvie's "nice little classmate" as a boarder in the Victorian mansion to which young Mr. Zimmermann had brought his bride after the Boxer Rebellion, and where Evvie had been born when her parents were already middle-aged. For once they resisted Evvie's violent objections to the arrangement ("She's going to pray out loud and try to save my soul"); Kathy was installed, and Dr. and Mrs. Ewers returned to Shantung, happy in the thought that their young daughter was well looked after in a solidly respectable Christian household.

Neither set of parents ever learned of Evvie's after-school and nocturnal activities. Contrary to Evvie's unvoiced fears, the "goody-goody mission brat" not only failed to "snitch," but even seemed fascinated when she first surprised Evvie in the process of weighing out small quantities of a white powder on a postage scale.

Thereafter Kathy would sit cross-legged on Evvie's bed and watch as Evvie deftly weighed the powder and then wrapped the little portions in paper and cellophane, chatting gaily about her good friend Hans von Albers, whom she "owed" for doing her math homework. Kathy never found

out whether Evvie received money in addition to solved math problems for her services, although she never seemed short of cash and apparently did not mind losing, sometimes heavily, at the races, the only outdoor activity she enjoyed.

Kathy usually was half asleep when Evvie crept out the window to distribute her packages and, that duty discharged, kept assignments with various commissioned members of whatever armies and navies happened to be stationed in Tientsin at the time, to come creeping back the same way shortly before dawn.

Kathy knew, of course, that what Evvie was doing was wicked and sinful, but it was part of Evvie's glamour and sophistication, which she admired deeply, humbly and without envy. Besides, a little heroin-pushing did not seem too reprehensible in a country where the heavy, sweetish odor of opium hung heavily in the air on a summer's night, and where many Westerners were as accustomed to their daily opium pipe as they were to cocktails before dinner; some were even known to have cut short their year's furlough when they ran out of supplies in their homeland.

Dr. and Mrs. Ewers did not require such supplies when, after Kathy's graduation, they went home on their sabbatical leave to enroll their daughter at the medical school in Basel.

The recent Anschluss with Austria, and the subsequent invasion of Czechoslovakia and Poland, followed by the outbreak of World War II, did not seriously interfere with Kathy's studies in neutral Switzerland, despite the sporadic fighting at the nearby French-German border. But mail from China arrived with increasing irregularity and often with great delay, and the news about Mrs. Ewers' health became ever more alarming. When in the spring of 1940 Kathy finally returned to China, it was only to keep house for her father

and take typing lessons, since Peking Medical School did not accept foreign students. Soon after she had started in her job at the Paleoanatomy Laboratory her father died, and she was left alone in a small Chinese house off Hatamen Street with only her amah left by way of a family. Amah had been part of Kathy's life ever since she could remember, as nursemaid, teacher, servant and chaperone. But neither Amah's devotion nor the Professor's kindness could relieve Kathy's loneliness after her father's death. There were few datable young men left in Peking, although there was no lack of middle-aged grass widowers eager to show a pretty young woman a good time—for a price that Kathy considered far too high for an afternoon's game of tennis at the Peking Club and drinks and dinner afterward.

Kathy had become a loner, less from choice than from necessity, and she was happy to have found Evvie again.

As the rickshaws turned north into Nan Ho Yen, Kathy began to wonder about Evvie's husband, a chemist—which meant he was probably stodgy and respectable. Perhaps Evvie had reformed? And they had met at von Albers'; Hans must have reformed too. Perhaps he had gone into real estate—after all, he owned the house Evvie and Joe lived in...

While Kathy was speculating about Joe and Evvie's well-born German landlord, Evvie's thoughts, also, had returned from the Tientsin past to the Peking present. She had just decided that Kathy, though proven trustworthy, had better not know too much about Joe's chemistry, when the rickshaws stopped in front of a red-lacquered gate which was flanked by two elaborately carved stone lions. Evvie paid the coolies and operated the heavy brass knocker.



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