

Crimes of the Century

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Midnight Facts for Insomniacs

Podcast Transcript

(Note: transcript consists of episode outline)

I really enjoyed researching this one...I love it when I get the inside scoop on stories and headlines that I've always been vaguely aware of but didn't understand or may have understood incompletely or incorrectly. Like I've heard of the Lidnbergh baby, and I knew there was a crime associated with it, but I couldn't have given you any details. Now I'm going to give you a LOT of details,

and you can act like a smartass and tell your friends all about it during trivia night and they'll never let you come back.

The Lindbergh Kidnapping

This case appears on literally every "crime of the century" list you'll find. And it should, because it's a fascinating story. 100 years ago, aviators were American heroes. Airplanes were still an exciting new technology, and each aviation milestone was greeted as enthusiastically as a new brand of shiny mustache wax. Seriously, it was out of control. Every time one of these flyboys or flywomen achieved even the most modest new goal, everyone acted like it was a huge deal and declared a national holiday. "Have you heard? Today was the first time a plane flew over more than three trees on a Wednesday!

Chaos in the streets.

Whiskey at 9am. That was actually standard for the time. That's just breakfast. But seriously, I don't think the cult of personality that formed around these larger-than-life aviators can be overstated. We still know their names. Amelia Earhart, Howard Hughes, Charles Lindbergh. Like, Americans in the early 1900s were super horny for pilots, and when I started researching this episode I didn't have a good explanation, I mean I get that these were impressive milestones, but as far as I could tell they were mostly feats of technology. Charles Lindbergh didn't swim across the Atlantic dragging his airplane behind him; he sat in a seat and pushed buttons. But after deep diving into this stuff, now I get it. Because the technology was amazing for the time, but it was also

super sketchy. We covered Amelia Earhart in our missing persons episode, and again, her disappearance wasn't a mystery, it was a murder, and the perpetrator was a go-cart sized quote-unquote aircraft made from tinfoil and dreams. Plus the weather. Raindrops and delusion killed Amelia Earhart. Have you seen her plane? The Lockheed Vega 5B looks like a ceiling fan attached to a cigar. The entire frame of an early-1900s aircraft was slightly bigger than the pilot's lap. These things were often literally slapped together from spare parts, and frequently transported in pieces and assembled hours before a flight. So it took guts or insanity to strap into an airplane from the experimental era, and as a result, successful pilots and aviators became the influencers of the time.

Except bigger. Charles Lindbergh was like Kim Kardashian and LeBron James rolled into one awkward introverted weirdo. Not that there's anything wrong with introverted weirdos. Those are my people. But he WAS considered a somewhat shy and reluctant celebrity. His reserved nature seemed to run counter to his ambitions. As a young pilot he called himself, "The Aerial Daredevil Lindbergh," and was known for parachuting stunts and for walking on the wings of his aircraft. Eventually he gave up on trying to make it as a roaring-20s Evil Knieval, and instead enrolled in the Army air service cadet program, graduating first in his class in 1925. He joined the United States air Mail service as a postal pilot—slightly less flashy than a daredevil. I wonder if he was still stunting it up, dangling off

the wing of the plane and tossing letters down chimneys, you've gotta find ways to get that rush. But his flirtation with obscurity didn't last long, as he was catapulted to fame by winning the Orteig prize. So we have to talk about these prizes. One of the reasons that aviation technology advanced as quickly as it did in the early 1900s was via competitions and prizes offered by rich entrepreneurs and aviation enthusiasts. You can see some similarities to today. There was no NASA in the early 1900s; much like today all of the innovation in aerial technology was being driven by private industry and the military.

The Orteig prize, named after New York real estate magnate Raymond Orteig, was a \$25,000 reward intended to inspire young aviators—specifically male aviators—to make terrible

decisions and choose greed over common sense. It was a double dog dare with a reward that would've equaled over 300,000 of today's dollars, which is a lot, in fact it would be enough money to fund a really lavish funeral, because the Orteig Prize involved almost certain death. I'm glad I live in a time when there are plenty of ways to win money that don't involve a 90% chance of boomsplode. You could win that much money on tv today by phrasing your answers in the form of a question. So here was the official text of the offer:

"Gentlemen: As a stimulus to the courageous aviators, I desire to offer, through the auspices and regulations of the Aero Club of America, a prize of \$25,000 to the first aviator of any Allied Country crossing the Atlantic in one flight, from Paris to New York or New York to Paris, all

other details in your care.

Yours very sincerely,

Raymond Orteig"

He continued, May the odds be forever in your favor. Are you not entertained? They're all gonna die.

Now this would not be the first transatlantic flight. That was completed eight years earlier by John Alcock and Arthur Brown, as the result of yet another competition and some prize money. That was a wild story, those guys flew across the ocean in a biplane, one of those Indiana Jones planes with the sandwiched wings that look like they're held together by matchsticks and crepe paper. Their intercom and heater and radio failed pretty much immediately after takeoff and an exhaust pipe burst, emitting a terrible noise that made it impossible to communicate with each other or anyone else during the frigid 16-hour flight, they hit a

snowstorm, the carburetors iced up and they lost control of the plane twice, spiraling toward the ocean in corkscrew death dives before regaining control.

Also, maybe worst of all, no in-flight WiFi. Probably no complimentary beverage service, I doubt there were even peanuts.

They made it, barely, In addition to winning the 10,000 pounds promised by the Daily Mail, they were knighted, and celebrated worldwide as heroes. Alcock basked in his newfound fame for six months before he was killed in a plane crash. That first transatlantic flight was from Newfoundland to Ireland, about 1800 miles.

Lindbergh's solo flight would be almost twice that distance. So after the Orteig was offered, for the better part of a decade no one claimed the prize, but the prize did claim lives. Multiple

pilots were lost or killed in pursuit of the Paris to New York attempt. Meanwhile, Lindbergh was finally able to obtain funding from a couple of investors and also threw in some of his own money, and obtained the custom-built Spirit of Saint Louis monoplane. A monoplane is what we today might call "a plane." So just one wing, no matchsticks and wax. I feel like those biplanes were inspired by the Icarus myth. You don't want to fly too close to the sun with one of those, it'll self-destruct. So Lindbergh succeeded where others had failed, and claiming the Orteig Prize hauled him into an unforgiving and possibly unprecedented spotlight. People were "behaving as though Lindbergh had walked on water, not flown over it." The New York Times printed [the] page-wide headline: "LINDBERGH DOES IT!" His mother's

house in Detroit was mobbed by a crowd. He was awarded the Medal of Honor by president Calvin Coolidge and became the first ever Time Magazine Man of the Year, establishing an exclusive club that would grow to include such luminaries such as Vladimir Putin, Mark Zuckerberg, and Adolf Hitler. True story. Hitler was Man of the Year for 1938; he received the honor in January 1939 only months before he invaded Poland and kicked off World War 2. Also, in 1975, the man of the year was American Women. All of them. So...a very exclusive award shared with Hitler and zuckerberg and about 110 million people with two X chromosomes. Still pretty cool.

Lindbergh didn't seem to let the fame go to his head, at least at first. He was considered modest, and not a showboater. He first met his wife in 1927, the

daughter of an ambassador to Mexico who also happened to be one of his financial advisers. So the guy knew what Lindbergh was worth and was like, hey Lindbergh, have you met my daughter?" Lindbergh was popularly considered a paragon of virtue, and even criticized other pilots for being "facile" regarding relationships. Fuckboys. That's what he meant. I like how passive-aggressive everyone was in the early 1900s. "At the risk of impugning their moral fortitude I must refer to my peers as facile in their romantic pursuits. In short, filthy manwhores."

Lindbergh would later cheat on his wife, fathering five children with a pair of German sisters in addition to two with his secretary. "Ten days before he died, Lindbergh wrote to each of his European mistresses, imploring them to maintain

the utmost secrecy about his illicit activities with them even after his death." So... paragon of virtue.

But back before all of the sordid affairs, the Lindberghs had a son in 1930, and after expending a ton of creative energy, brainstorming with flow charts, they decided to name the boy Charles Lindbergh, because hey, that "Charles Lindbergh" name was working out pretty well so far. If it ain't broke. An undeniably lucky name. Based on the topic of this episode it's clearly going to work out great for him.

At 9pm on March 1st 1932, one year old Charles Lindbergh was abducted from the second floor nursery of his New Jersey home. The kidnapper left a ransom note in barely legible, rambling script on the windowsill demanding \$50,000. The text of the note read: Dear Sir! Have

50.000\$ redy 25 000\$ in
20\$ bills 15000\$ in 10\$ bills
and 10000\$ in 5\$ bills After
2-4 days we will inform you
were to deliver the mony. We
warn you for making anyding
public or for notify the Police
the child is in gut care.

Indication for all letters are
Singnature and 3 hohls

I can't get over how they
started a ransom note with
"dear Sir." I don't know what
to say about that. It was a
different time. That doesn't
seem circumstances that
call for politeness and
honorifics. "To whom it may
concern, with all due respect
we must inform you that we
plan to dismember your
progeny and urinate on its
headless torso.

Sincerely,

The Criminals

The signature to which the
kidnappers were referring
was a scribbled image like a
Venn diagram, two blue
circles intersecting a red

circle in the middle. There was a hole through the red circle, and two more holes punched on either side. Obviously this was how the kidnappers intended to sign all of their letters, and because presumably no one else would have seen the letter, the symbol would provide verification that the letters were authentic, rather than from some opportunistic faker who might hear about the case. And they were correct in assuming that no one would see the letter as long as by "no one" they meant a thousand police officers and FBI agents and handwriting analysts and sneaky journalists. It wasn't a great plan. Within hours of the kidnapping, the crime scene was mobbed by sightseers who trampled the area around the house and most likely obliterated any potential evidence that might have been collected.

The press went wild. It was a sensation. A second ransom note arrived five days later. *"Dear Sir. We have warned you not to make anything public also notify the police now you have to take consequences- means we will have to hold the baby until everything is quite. We can not make any appointments just now. We know very well what it means to us. It is really necessary to make a world affair out of this, or to get your baby back as soon as possible to settle those affair in a quick way will be better for both- don't be afraid about the baby- keeping care of us day and night. We also will feed him according to the diet. We are interested to send him back in good health. And ransom was made for 50000\$ but now we have to take another person to it and probably have to keep the baby for a longer time as we*

expected. So the amount will be 70,000 20000 in 50\$ bills 25000\$ in 20\$ bill 15000\$ in 10\$ bills and 10000 in 5\$ bills Don't mark any bills or take them from one serial nomer. We will form you latter were to deliver the mony. But we will note do so until the Police is out of the cace and the pappers are quite. The kidnapping we prepared in years so we are prepared for everyding

We prepared for years so that everything in this moment would go exactly according to plan, we did not neglect a single aspect of this operation, however we WERE unable to secure a dictionary to verify spelling. Oh you say dictionaries are available for free at every public library, even in the early 1900s? That IS unfortunate. Thinking back, we may have been a tiny bit hasty. I'm starting to not feel

great about this masterplan. It's more like an apprentice plan. It hasn't achieved master status. It's a plan-in-training. I also love that they were so specific and detailed with explaining the demand for more money. They're like, "inflation is hitting kidnappers hard these days, and we've had to expand our criminal syndicate, more mouths to feed, sorry to bother but we will need a few extra dollars if you would prefer that we not torture and dismember your son. Apologies for the inconvenience. Alternately, we could deliver half of your son for half the price, it's up to you. We're willing to negotiate. How many legs do you want?"

So now the ransom was up to 70k, but the details still had yet to be worked out, because you know, "master plan." The Lindberghs appointed an intermediary to

negotiate with the kidnappers, and the kidnappers used their third ransom note to nix that idea, because hey, these guys are no dummies. Don't mess with the plan! It is infallible. A retired school principal name John Condon published an offer in a local newspaper to act as intermediary, and he also said he would add 1,000 dollars to the ransom, and the thieves were like, that'll work. Not sure what it is but there's something we really like about this Condon guy. Probably has to do with his commitment to education, and not with the extra 1k. They should have been like, "Throw in some spelling lessons and you have yourself a deal."

So this is when the operation went full Mission Impossible. The next ransom note was delivered directly to Condon by a taxicab driver, who had received it from a random stranger. A taxi driver who

apparently didn't have a lot to do that day, because if a stranger gave me a note and told me to deliver it to some other dude I'd be like, I'm good. Do I look like taskrabbit? Even if he offered me some money, like hey, I already have a job. I guess he probably paid for the taxicab fare to Condon's location, but still, I'm a taxicab driver not UPS. Deliver your own sketchy letters you weirdo. But anyway this most recent scribbled-ass nonsense letter directed Condon to a particular stone near a subway station. Underneath the stone was the sixth letter, which instructed him to meet a stranger at a cemetery. And that's when I'd be out. Like I want to help you find your kid but I'm not following cryptic notes to cemeteries. Condon met in the cemetery with a man who called himself John, I'm assuming that was a fake

name, but I also wouldn't be shocked if these geniuses were like, "You know what they'll never expect? If we use our real names, and print our actual address on the envelopes. They'd never see that coming. Do you have a selfie we can send?" I guess it would just be a photo, no one was taking selfies. Trying to hold up one of those fifty pound cameras in front of your face for like seven hours in front of the Golden Gate Bridge. But it's legit amazing how many of these crimes of the century were committed by borderline imbeciles, as we'll see. You can get away with a lot if people have low expectations of your capabilities. "That guy can barely feed himself, I'm pretty sure he's not an international criminal mastermind with a master plan."

So John in quotation marks told Condon that he would

provide some token that would prove he actually had possession of the child. Hopefully not Big Lebowski style. I don't want a toddler's toe. The kidnapper or kidnappers would in fact would send the kid's pajamas. So now my child is naked, thanks. Very comforting.

This ransom-note scavenger hunt continued, there were a total of 12 ransom notes received, and meanwhile the FBI was employing all of their latest techniques to create a criminal profile.

They determined that "John" was mostly likely of German descent but living in America. They also created an artistic rendering of the mysterious German, which, spoiler alert, did not look much like the eventually unmasked perpetrator. At least in my opinion. It was the most generic dude you could sketch. Like identifiable as a dude, but

that's about it. Remember the sketch of DB Cooper? Basic Caucasian. The perpetrator-sketch version of white woman's Instagram. "Chalk-white skin. Average sized nose. Eyes as dead as marbles." Via ransom notes and responses in the press, the final dollar amount was negotiated to 50,000 dollars, a sum which was delivered to the so-called John on April 12, 1932 in exchange for the final note, lucky number 13, which contained instructions for locating the child who was supposedly on a boat Near Martha's Vinyard in Massachusetts. He was not. No trace of the child was found in Martha's Vinyard...however, ten days later, a tiny body was discovered next to the highway about five miles from the Lindbergh home. The details are pretty grim... the child was in an advanced state of decomposition and had most likely been killed

on the night of the kidnapping via blunt force trauma to the head. Some limbs were missing. I've never found a solid explanation for that. It doesn't seem like we know why the perpetrator suddenly murdered and dismembered the kid or if that was the plan all along. The police quickly announced a \$25,000 reward for information leading to the arrest of the kidnapper, which...cool, but didn't you give the kidnapper twice that much? So unless he's already spent the whole 50,000 dollars, if I help you catch the guy, you're actually saving money by recovering the ransom and only giving me half. This is not a great deal. The bulk of the ransom, 40k, had been paid via gold certificates--we covered the gold standard in our recent cryptocurrency episode. You'll note that the

kidnapping coincided with the government's order to turn in all gold and gold certificates in exchange for greenbacks, so those gold certificates would have to be turned over to a bank, another brilliant aspect of the kidnapper's master plan. So the serial numbers of the gold certificates were distributed nationwide to banks so that they would know immediately when they were exchanged and could determine where they had been spent. Even this dumb-ass spelling-challenged kidnapper wasn't going to exchange the certificates directly in person at a bank, but the proprietors of any shop at which he spent those bills would have to turn them in per the government order. So eventually, the gold certificates started to trickle in, and each time one was redeemed, the Feds tracked it to the location where the

certificate was spent, and placed a pin marking the location. They zeroed in on the boroughs of New York City. Most of the bills were being spent at corner stores, and the description of the man spending the bills fit the description of the mysterious John. The big break in the case finally came on September 18, 1934, when a guy matching John's description spent a \$10 certificate at a gas station in New York city. The clerk who received the bill was suspicious about receiving a gold certificate as payment, and had secretly written down the license plate of the man's car. The automobile was registered to one Bruno Richard Hauptmann from the Bronx. He was arrested shortly thereafter, and all of the pieces fell into place. A native German who had snuck into America a decade prior, Hauptmann was in

possession of \$13,000 worth of the gold certificates from the ransom, his handwriting matched the ransom notes, and he had a rap sheet for robbery. His motive was assumed to have been the obvious one, financial benefit, but there was never a solid explanation for why he might have killed the child. Prosecutors would assert that the child had been fussy and loud and Hauptmann had panicked and disposed of the baby. The trial was an absolute media circus, in America and around the world. Pitting a wealthy American socialite against a poor German immigrant just a few years before WW2 raised inevitable issues of race and class and immigration policy. Americans packed into cinemas to receive updates about the 6-week trial. It might have seemed open and shut, but there were some weird inconsistencies.

Condon, who had met numerous times with the kidnapper, failed to pick Hauptmann out of a lineup. Cameras were allowed in the courtroom but journalists were forbidden to record witness testimony...which is kind of like saying cameras are allowed in a football stadium as long as they don't record the game. Journalists flouted the rule, and videos of the sparring between Hauptmann and the prosecutor caused such a sensation that the American Bar Association banned recording in courtrooms for decades. Another aspect fueling the fascination with the trial was the fact that all of the evidence was circumstantial. There was no smoking gun. So this was one of the first widely-followed trials that was prosecuted via forensic evidence and deductive reasoning. Hauptmann was found guilty and executed by

electric chair on April 3, 1936.

Theft of the Mona Lisa

I included this one mostly because the aftermath of this crime is still extremely relevant today, and it affects us all even if we're not aware. For instance, here's something you already know: the Mona Lisa is one of the most famous paintings in history.

Everyone is familiar with the vaguely smiling, smug ass Mona Lisa. I've never figured out that expression. Here's something you might not know: The Mona Lisa is only world-famous because it was the central figure in a crime of the century. That's the only reason any of us have heard of that painting. The Mona Lisa was considered an unremarkable and obscure work by Leonardo da Vinci before it

was stolen from a wall of the Louvre on August 21, 1911.

Presumably part of the reason that thieves targeted the Mona Lisa is because it's tiny. I know a comedian, Red Scot, shoutout to Red, who went to the Louvre and I remember he would say, "if you've seen a picture of the Mona Lisa on your phone, you've seen an enlarged version of the Mona Lisa." Or something like that. That's an exaggeration, but not by much. The painting is 30" x 21", 77 cm x 53 cm. It would make a decent sized frisbee. I didn't say would be a good frisbee. I'm just saying you could toss this thing around with your buddies. If you were an art collector and this painting like the featured centerpiece of your gallery, that gallery is going to look pretty sparse. You don't want a gallery centerpiece that's dwarfed by the exit sign.

First, it's important to know that the Louvre wasn't always a massive tourist destination. I don't know if you've seen the inside of this place, but on a typical pre-covid day the gallery that holds the Mona Lisa was uncomfortable to say the least. Every single day it would be packed with a throng of people holding their cell phones in the air trying to zoom in and get a photo of this stupid little postage stamp size painting. But it sure as hell wasn't like that in 1911. In fact, at the time the Mona Lisa wasn't even the most famous painting in that *room* of the Louvre, let alone the entire world. Seriously, I don't get the Mona Lisa. If I had never seen it before, and I walked past it in a museum, I wouldn't look twice. It's a tiny little nondescript plain boring painting. So the Louvre in 1911 has been described as a trophy case

for the French monarchy. Among its trophies, it held many of the art pieces Napoleon had plundered during his campaigns. Because remember, Leonardo da Vinci was not French. He was Italian. Why does the Louvre have a bunch of works by one of Italy's most famous citizens? That's a question to keep in mind for later.

But the point is that the Louvre wasn't an international tourist attraction, the Mona Lisa wasn't the most famous painting in the world, and museum security in 1911 was a bit light. There was no crisscrossing maze of laser beams.

At the time the Louvre was closed on Mondays, and in Paris, in the early 1900s, Sunday evenings were notorious for drinking and partying. So, many of the security guards would've been, let's say, not bringing

their A game. At 8:30 AM, the maintenance director noticed the Mona Lisa was missing. At first he assumed it had been removed for a photo shoot or for cleaning. It wasn't until the following day, when a painter who is slightly with less well known Leonardo da Vinci, Louis Béroud, showed up to paint an image of the Mona Lisa. He wanted to paint the painting. It's kind of a long story, but the museum had recently installed a glass cover over the painting which was supposed to protect it from vandalism, because a different painting had recently been slashed by a self-described anarchist. Interesting.

"There are two things in this world I hate: laws and tiny paintings." So Louis Béroud had been planning to paint a image of a woman fixing her hair in the reflection of the glass covering the Mona Lisa, to point out how

distracting the glass pane could be for museum-goers trying to view the artwork. His plan was complicated by the fact that on that particular day, there was no glass covering for him to paint. And his plan was made even more complicated by the fact that there was no Mona Lisa to paint, either. The Mona Lisa had been stolen.

We're going to unravel the mystery, but first let's unravel some history. Sick rhymes. The Mona Lisa was painted on a piece of wood by Leonardo da Vinci in the 1500s, and it is believed to depict the wife of wealthy silk trader Francesco del Giocondo. The woman was not named Mona Lisa.

"Mona" is shorthand for Madonna, the Virgin Mary, and it was an honorific in Italy in the 1500s. The woman's name was Lisa, and Mona Lisa means "Madame Lisa" or Miss Lisa." Although

the woman in the painting might not actually be her at all. There's no solid evidence of Giocondo commissioning the painting or providing any payment, so the mystery of Mona Lisa's identity will probably never be solved.

The Mona Lisa has no eyebrows or eyelashes.

Always wondered why the face looked weird to me, and bingo, eyebrows and eyelashes are actually kind of important when it comes to not creeping people the fuck out. Apologies to anyone who doesn't have eyebrows and eyelashes, that is actually a medical condition, but it's also pretty easy to paint those suckers on. But don't feel obligated. I won't stare or mock you, I'm an enlightened dude.

So now back to 1911. The museum administrators started frantically searching for the painting, and they found its frame discarded in a staircase, removed from

the painting but not mangled; the painting seemed to have been deftly removed. After determining that the painting was not on site, they contacted the authorities. In the early twentieth century, the world was more connected than it had ever been as a result of the telegraph, and news of the theft exploded like a bombshell across the western world. The western world was very bored in 1911. There was not a lot going on in that particular week. And to be fair, the theft makes for a great story. The Mona Lisa was portrayed in the press not as a theft of a piece of art, but as the kidnapping of a beautiful woman. A beautiful, smug, eyebrowless woman. But as far as anyone knew she was a beautiful woman, because no one knew what this damn painting looked like anyway. To give you an idea of how

well-known the painting wasn't at the time, the Washington Post ran a news story on the front page titled "priceless art treasure gone" accompanied by a giant black-and-white photo of a completely different painting. But the French police felt that this caper was a huge embarrassment, and they were determined to solve the case and rehabilitate their image, and meanwhile the rest of the world really enjoys laughing at the French, so the story had all of the necessary elements to make it a massive media event. During their investigation of the Louvre, French police were able to find a single clear fingerprint on the painting's frame. Now at the time, fingerprint identification was in its infancy. The police did have a database of over 750,000 fingerprints. 750,000 physical pieces of card stock

with fingerprints on them. Multiple fingerprints per card. So all they had to do was manually match a single fingerprint to one of the prints on the 750,000 cards, assuming the criminal was even in the database. This was not a great time to be a detective. Can you imagine having that job? If the fingerprint didn't match the first five cards, I'm just going to let that one go. "You win this round, evil genius. I'm going to go have some cheese and a baguette. Cause it's France."

But when it comes to detectives, Paris had one of the best on the case. Louis Lepine, an innovator in the field of forensic science, nicknamed "the little man with a big stick."

Unfortunate. The nickname apparently referred to his skill in handling mobs. Up to that point French crowd control tactics appear to have consisted mostly of

ordering upwards of 20,000 troops to crack a bunch of skulls. This was a time of great civil unrest in Paris, much of it consisting of demonstrations against police brutality. BTW if you're trying to control demonstrators who are marching against police brutality, I'm not sure the best strategy is to utilize police brutality. When Louis was elected the head of police, he apparently used a divide and conquer approach to riot control, funneling different factions of the crowd into different areas, and I'm not sure how that relates to a big stick, but whatever, he seems to have been a pretty smart guy who was definitely on the wrong side of that particular issue. A career built on specializing in crowd control tactics didn't age well.

Louis did come up with some intelligent approaches

to the case of the missing semi famous painting. First, he was able to narrow down the time window of the theft by interviewing employees as to when each of them last saw the painting, and connecting the dots. Next, he placed a mockup of the painting back on the wall and instructed some of his officers to attempt to steal it. Because they didn't know how the frame was hung (there were four metal pegs securing it to the wall) it took them a while to get the frame off, and they damaged it in the process. He then instructed some museum employees to remove it, and they accomplished the task in five seconds. So he began to suspect that thieves had at least one "man on the inside," one or more employees of the Louvre. This significantly narrowed down the number of fingerprints to compare. He began fingerprinting all of

the employees and comparing them to his one print. When none of them matched, he expanded the scope of the investigation to include companies that might've done contract-work in the Louvre recently. One of those contractors was the company that installed the glass covering for the Mona Lisa. All of the employees of that contractor showed up for fingerprinting, except one. And that one employee, Vincenzo Peruggia, had a criminal record which included abusing a prostitute, and theft. The only problem was that Louis Lepine refused to believe that an ignorant, poor, petty thief could have pulled off a heist of this magnitude. The profile in his mind was of some type of evil genius or sophisticated burglar working for a syndicate of dastardly art thieves. Also, Peruggia came across as

kind of an idiot. If this dude was the perpetrator, the French were going to be the laughing stock of the international community. As a result, detectives let him go without even bothering to fingerprint him. So if you want to get away with theft, act really stupid, or be really stupid.

To give you an idea of how far off track the police were at this point, after letting go of the actual criminal, they promptly arrested Pablo Picasso. Picasso fit the profile that Lapine had devised, an international art expert. Plus, Picasso was in possession of stolen items from the Louvre. So there was that. He had in fact purchased some figurines that had been stolen from the Louvre in order to paint them into a scene, so for a while it wasn't looking great for him. But he also very clearly had nothing to do with the theft in the Mona

Lisa, so after a few days they let him go. But the arrest of a famous artist in connection with the theft of the work of a famous artist fueled the tabloid-style, sensationalist coverage of the affair. The entire world was now riveted. But months passed with no breaks in the case, and the world eventually began to move on. The following year, the Titanic sank, and the world had a new fixation. Also, as we now know, Kim Il-sung was born, and thousands of soldiers broke into song. It must have been a weird time for the world—the mona lisa was stolen, and the seasons spontaneously changed from winter to spring. But despite the fact that the world had moved on to focus on the Titanic, the Mona Lisa wasn't ready to sink into obscurity. Get it? Sink into obscurity? Titanic? 28 months after the theft, an Italian art dealer in Florence

named Alfredo Geri placed an ad in the local paper announcing that he was "a buyer at good prices of art objects of every sort." He quickly received a letter from a man who claimed to possess the Mona Lisa, and offered to sell it for the bargain price of today's equivalent of 500,000 pounds. The letter was signed Leonardo. Clever. The thief claimed that he had stolen the painting to return it to its home in Italy, and his only stipulation was that the painting never be returned to France.

"Leonardo" invited the art dealer to his hotel room to view the painting. The art dealer contacted a local museum director named Giovanni Poggi, and the two of them met the thief in his hotel room, where they were able to verify the authenticity of the painting. Here's basically what happened next: they said,

“cool, thanks for this. We’re just going to go ahead and take this off your hands and make sure that it’s real and then we’ll send you the money. And the thief was like sweet. Looking forward to that.” And the two men just walked the hell out of there with the Mona Lisa under their arms and immediately called the police.

The police promptly arrested Vincenzo Peruggia, a blue-collar Italian guy who seemed to have nothing going for him except animosity toward the French, limited access to the Louvre, and a whole lot of moxie. Over the following weeks police were able to piece together what had happened. Peruggia had observed the lax security of the Louvre while he was installing the glass covering over the Mona Lisa. And obviously he had working knowledge of how the

painting was mounted, and how it could be quickly and easily removed. There are conflicting accounts of how the theft went down, but Peruggia's own account provided during the police interrogation seems most credible. Peruggia entered the building at 7 AM through the worker entrance, dressed in a smock worn by the museum cleaners. He waited until the coast was clear, and then plucked the painting from the wall, removed his smock and wrapped it around the painting, then walked out the front door. Crime of the century!

The Fatty Arbuckle Scandal

Roscoe Arbuckle was rotund. He was a large man. So large in fact that the childhood nickname bestowed on him by schoolyard bullies stuck with

him throughout his life and would eventually become a world-famous stage name as he rose to prominence in comedic films of the early 1900s. Once an impoverished child from a broken home, by 1919 Fatty Arbuckle was a millionaire and the highest paid comedy star in America, beloved around the world, until suddenly he wasn't. As one of the first major stars of the silent film era, Arbuckle was described as a chubby Charlie Chaplin, and in fact many of his movies are interchangeable with scenes and films by the tramp, as Chaplin was known. They both famously did the little shoe dance by spearing pieces of bread with forks and performing high kicks with them, you know what I'm talking about? Arbuckle was extremely limber and athletic despite his size, and very coordinated. One of my favorite of his film scenes

involves him flipping pancakes, tossing them over his shoulder and catching them with the pan, bouncing them off his knees and feet like a hackysack. But most of the comedy in his films was pretty mean-spirited, centered around making fun of his weight. Arbuckle was a huge hit among the children of the era, because kids are assholes. Most adults have figured out that making fun of overweight people isn't cool, but the kids of the early 1900s were the same as the kids of today, self-centered jerks who gave zero fucks about other peoples feelings. It's not their fault, they're just kids. Arbuckle would initially make his mark on Vaudeville stages before switching to silent films, and he would even cameo as one of the bumbling silent-film-era police officers known as the Keystone Kops, universal symbols of incompetence.

The Keystone Kops were so popular that they became a descriptive phrase: to this day any group that thoroughly mishandles a situation might be referred to as a bunch of keystone cops. That's pretty cool. I would like that to be our legacy, to become an actual insult. "This operation is a total disaster, who's in charge here, Shane and Duncan, is this some kind of miffy debacle?"

In the early 1900s, Northern California was considered a playground for Hollywood stars. Actors who faced scrutiny in Los Angeles could escape to NorCal to relax and let loose, which is just what Roscoe had planned for Memorial Day, September 5, 1921. Along with his friends Lowell Sherman and Fred fishback, Arbuckle checked into San Francisco's Saint Francis hotel and promptly started boozing it up. If you're

wondering how it was so easy to throw a high-profile booze-fueled bash in the Prohibition era, check out episode number 70, dry America. Prohibition was a farce, especially for the wealthy. Pretty soon women starting to show up, including Virginia Rappe, a youngish aspiring actress (there is some debate about her age, despite what Wikipedia will tell you she was most likely at least 30 at the time). Virginia was accompanied by a friend she had met recently: Bambina Maude Delmont, a sketchy character with a rap sheet that included extortion, prostitution, and blackmail. What happened next will never be conclusively resolved, but at least a few of the facts are indisputable. First, Roscoe Arbuckle had second-degree burns on his ass. That's completely unrelated to the subsequent death and murder trial, but I

think it's important to point out because I really wanted to bring it up. He had been at a mechanic's garage in Los Angeles a few days before and had sat down on an acid soaked rag, which had eaten through his pants and scorched his buttocks. Arbuckle had initially wanted to cancel the San Francisco trip as a result of his flambéed derrière, but was convinced to go by fishback who purchased a rubber padded ring to ease Arbuckles butt-pain during the drive. That's a good friend. I'd take care of your ass. So maybe just keep in mind that even if this story gets a little bit grim, fatty Arbuckle had ass burns during the entire fiasco. Seems like something that would have been the plot of one of his films. "This week at the Nickelodeon: Fat guy burns butt." So at some point during the booze-soaked party, Virginia Rappe

was discovered writhing on the bed in room 1219, one of three rooms booked for the festivities. She was clawing at her stomach, attempting to tear off her clothes, clearly in immense pain.

Note that her clothes were still on. The hotel doctor was summoned, and assuming she was suffering from alcohol poisoning, he administered morphine. If someone is overdosing from a depressant, you should probably add the most powerful narcotic available at the time, it's a fight-fire-with-napalm situation. When in doubt, heroin. That's always been our motto.

When boomsplode, heroin. Hair of the dog and also rabies of the dog.

Over the next two days, various doctors were summoned, but Virginia was kept in the hotel room and wasn't sent to a hospital until it was too late. Arbuckle was not present for any of

this, BTW, he had departed for Los Angeles, heading home to his wife, who would remain solidly in his corner throughout the aftermath. Virginia was finally sent to the hospital some 48 hours after the onset of symptoms, but would slip into a coma and succumb to her ailment. So those are the facts, everything else is conjecture, but there is pretty solid consensus when it comes to what *didn't* happen. Doctors found no evidence of rape, and no traumatic injuries to the body that would have resulted in death. Virginia died from a ruptured bladder. She suffered from extreme urinary tract infections, and various witnesses would later claim that she had experienced similar reactions to alcohol in the past. However, one supposed witness told a different story. The aforementioned blackmailing

extortion-prostitute Bambina Maude Delmont immediately implicated Roscoe Arbuckle, claiming that he had raped and murdered her friend.

However, her account shifted wildly over the following weeks. She variously claimed she had known Virginia for years, and then later stated that they had just met, and vacillated on most of the night's details. Oh, and there was a little matter of a telegram she sent to attorneys after Virginia's death which read, "we have Roscoe Arbuckle in a hole here chance to make some money out of him." All in caps. I think that might just be how telegrams were formatted, but I'm pretty sure she would have sent it that way regardless.

Bambina strikes me as an all-caps Facebook and Instagrammer. She's very extra. But the newspapers went all in, piling on Arbuckle and splashing

sensationalized accounts of the supposed sexual assault all over the front page.

William Randolph Hearst, newspaper owner and media mobile, had a field day with this story. He was the Rupert Murdoch of his era, and a massive proponent of so-called yellow journalism.

Rumors and innuendo swirled, the stories from the evening were embellished beyond reason. Within weeks the prevailing narrative held that Arbuckle had ruptured Virginia's bladder both by the weight of his body on hers during the supposed brutal rape, and also by penetrating her with a Coke bottle, a random allegation which had never been mentioned by any of the actual partygoers.

Arbuckle was convicted in the court of public opinion long before his first trial even commenced. But the jury would not agree with the press. They failed to convict,

but also failed to find him innocent. The jury deadlocked at 10–2, with the majority voting to acquit. The next trial was an inverted copy of the first, a hung jury that voted majority to convict. By the third trial, however, the defense had learned their lesson. They employed tactics that would become standard practice in later years when defending men from rape allegations: they smeared and slandered the victim. They implied that Virginia had abortions in the past, that she was a loose woman and a gold digger. Which is terrible, and untrue, but also doesn't make Roscoe Arbuckle a rapist. Remember that consensus I mentioned? Historians have overwhelmingly sided with a belief in his innocence. In the third trial the jury only took a few minutes to find Arbuckle fully innocent, and they went even further: the jury officially apologized to

Roscoe Arbuckle, releasing a statement that read
"Acquittal is not enough for Roscoe Arbuckle. We feel that a great injustice has been done to him ... there was not the slightest proof adduced to connect him in any way with the commission of a crime. He was manly throughout the case and told a straightforward story which we all believe. We wish him success and hope that the American people will take the judgment of fourteen men and women that Roscoe Arbuckle is entirely innocent and free from all blame."

Despite his acquittal, Arbuckle's career never recovered. He was briefly banned from performing under his name, as a result of the Hays code, the precursor to motion picture ratings which enforced moral standards in film. Eight months later the

decision was reversed, but by then it was too late.

Arbuckle stepped behind the camera and began directing movies under an assumed name, William be Goodrich, "will be good" (that's like one of my puns). Arbuckle never recovered his former stature...career-wise...he was still portly, and he died of a heart attack in a hotel room ironically in 1933. If I were him I probably would've avoided hotel rooms. I'm sure he had friends he could stay with. He was still rich.

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[Who were Francesco del Giocondo and his wife Lisa Gherardini? - The Mona Lisa Foundation](#)

[When Picasso Went on Trial for Stealing the Mona Lisa - Artsy](#)