

CRIMINAL



Episode 67: Milk Carton Kids **Air date: May 19, 2017**

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Phoebe Judge: Hi, it's Phoebe, and I'm recording myself from the Ace Theater at the Ace Hotel in downtown Los Angeles. We're about to perform the final show of Radiotopia Live. We've been in Portland, Seattle, San Francisco, and now in LA, and it's been great to meet so many of you.

From here, we're headed to Texas and New York to report some new stories. So, today, we're bringing you one of our favorite crime stories, from Roman Mars and our friends at 99% Invisible. Here's the show.

Roman Mars: This is 99% Invisible. I'm Roman Mars.

The story we're about to tell is pretty much the worst thing a parent can imagine.

Noreen Gosch: We were awakened by the phone ringing.

Roman Mars: That's Noreen Gosch. It was early on a Sunday morning in 1982, in Des Moines, Iowa. Noreen's son Johnny had left for his regular paper route.

Noreen Gosch: It was a neighbor saying they did not receive their newspapers.

Roman Mars: This wasn't like Johnny. He'd been a paperboy for years. He'd never missed a delivery.

Noreen Gosch: His dad got up and said, "I'll go help him finish the route, he's probably just running late." He went up the street, and that's where he saw Johnny's wagon sitting.

Roman Mars: Johnny's red wagon was sitting at the corner. It was still full of newspapers.

Noreen Gosch: He rushed back and told me Johnny was gone, and call the police.

Roman Mars: Johnny Gosch was 13 when he disappeared. He had blue eyes and dirty blond hair with a small gap between his front teeth — and his would be the first face of a missing child ever printed on a milk carton.

Annie Brown: It's been 30 years since these milk cartons came and went. I wasn't even alive to see them, but I still know about the faces on the milk cartons.

Roman Mars: That's reporter Annie Brown.

Annie Brown: The image of a missing child on a milk carton became iconic, a kind of cultural shorthand for missing children. And even though this image has stuck around for three decades, the actual milk carton campaign only lasted two years, and it was largely unsuccessful at locating the kids on the cartons.

Roman Mars: The morning that Johnny disappeared, Noreen said it took 45 minutes for the police to arrive, so she called around to the other boys who delivered papers that morning. She found five witnesses that saw her son talking to a man in a blue van. She relayed this to the police.

Noreen Gosch: The cop looked at me and said "Well, has your son ever run away before?" And I said, "Well no, he's never run away ever, nor did he run away today."

Annie Brown: But the police were skeptical. This was Iowa — this kind of thing wasn't supposed to happen to kids like Johnny in places like Iowa.

Noreen Gosch: We'd never had a crime like this before.

Roman Mars: This was before Amber alerts, before those text messages that you get when a kid goes missing. There wasn't even a category for missing children. Kids were put in the same group as missing adults, and an adult had to be gone for three days before they were considered missing.

Annie Brown: Without the police's help, Johnny's parents tried everything they could on their own. They hired private investigators and coordinated search parties...

Roman Mars: Meanwhile, as they searched, they also wrote Iowa state legislation that would differentiate missing children from missing adults.

Noreen Gosch: I wrote the Johnny Gosch Law at my kitchen table.

Annie Brown: But after all of this, Noreen Gosch's son was still gone.

Roman Mars: And then two years later, in 1984, another little boy disappeared while delivering newspapers. He lived in a neighborhood not far from Johnny's.

(Reporter): Eugene Martin was last seen delivering newspapers between 5:30 and 6 that morning. His paper bag with newspapers still inside was found just outside of Des Moines.

Annie Brown: This second paper boy had a relative who worked at a local dairy: The Anderson Erickson Dairy. The relative and the dairy's owner came up with an idea to help find these boys.

Noreen Gosch: The Anderson Erickson Dairy contacted each family, and they wanted to do something helpful in the investigations.

Annie Brown: The families of the missing boys agreed, and within a few short weeks, thousands of milk cartons were rolled out of trucks and into grocery stores all over Des Moines. As clerks stocked their shelves, the faces of Johnny Gosch and Eugene Martin smiled back.

Roman Mars: The campaign started out at one local dairy, but over the next few weeks it spread to other Midwestern towns. An Illinois dairy saw it and said, "Hey, why don't we try that?" And from there, it went national.

Barbara Huggett: Nearly everybody drinks milk. Milk turns over quickly, so we could put a lot of different kids' photos on — and pull children's off that needed to come off — at a moment's notice.

Annie Brown: That's Barbara Huggett. She was working as an artist at the National Child Safety Council in Michigan when the national milk carton campaign took off.

Barbara Huggett: Our founder, apparently he'd seen Johnny Gosch and Eugene Martin on the Anderson Erickson dairy milk cartons, but he felt that the program should be nationwide.

Roman Mars: A nationwide milk carton campaign would alert families in California to look for a child who went missing in Iowa.

Annie Brown: The national campaign brought together local groups looking for missing children, and together they came up with a list of 77 kids from all over the country.

Barbara Huggett: We used cases that were believed to be what they termed in those days, “dangerous stranger abductions.”

Roman Mars: In other words, kids that weren’t taken by someone they knew.

Annie Brown: Barb’s team didn’t have computers, so they cut and arranged all 77 layouts by hand.

Barbara Huggett: We designed a layout that was just you know, rather simple.

Roman Mars: In black block letters, the word MISSING was printed across the top of each waxy paper panel. Photos of two children were laid side by side, in black and white. Under the photos were their dates of birth, height, weight, and where they were last seen. They also printed the pictures on school milk cartons, but only one child could fit on those.

Annie Brown: Barb reached out to dairies all over the country asking if they’d be a part of the campaign. Within months, 700 independent dairies had signed on.

Barbara Huggett: Boy, I wish I knew how many cartons had circulated. I imagine it’s way into the billions. When you have 700, 750 dairies printing day in and day out, for years.

Annie Brown: Some sources have estimated that as many as 5 billion milk cartons were printed with the faces of missing children.

Roman Mars: 200 missing children were featured on milk cartons as part of the campaign led by the National Child Safety Council. Two were found alive. One was a kid named Bobby Smith Jr. Barb still remembers when she got the call about Bobby.

Barbara Huggett: After we’d gotten the word that the child had been found, it was just a sense of elation, and you wanted to let everyone know in the building that had mailed it, boxed it, shipped it, you know — you just wanted to tell everyone who had touched it that it was worthwhile. You could hear the cheer throughout the whole building. “Yay! We found a child!” It was wonderful, you know.

Annie Brown: But Bobby Smith wasn’t found because of the milk carton.

Roman Mars: Bobby was found by coincidence.

Annie Brown: His kidnappers’ car had been involved in an accident, and when the police came looking for the owner of the car, they found Bobby.

Roman Mars: The other child found alive was a girl named Sheryl Lynn Kramer. But most of the kids featured in the national campaign, and in the smaller local ones were never found.

Noreen Gosch: Unfortunately, the leads from the milk cartons did not reveal where Johnny's location was.

Annie Brown: That's Noreen Gosh again. Her son Johnny was never found. But Barbara Huggett and Noreen Gosh are both adamant that the campaign had a positive impact.

Noreen Gosch: What it did was promote more awareness so that people were looking. If they saw a child that looked like they were in distress, maybe you questioned whether or not those were the parents.

Roman Mars: During the milk carton campaign, the Missing Children Assistance Act was passed. It established a federal program to find missing kids.

Barbara Huggett: Changing the rules for children when they're missing, not having to wait the hours and days...

Annie Brown: And mostly, the milk cartons just got people thinking about kidnapping, that this could happen to your kid.

Noreen Gosch: I have talked to quite a number of adults, and they could remember their mom putting the milk carton on the kitchen table and saying, "Now, we're going to go over the rules again." And they would use the example of the boys on the milk carton.

Barbara Huggett: And make the correlation between that child and their child's life.

Roman Mars: In other words, the faces on the milk cartons scared the hell out of everyone.

Annie Brown: Which ultimately led to the campaign's downfall.

Roman Mars: Almost as quickly as it began, the milk carton campaign started by the National Child Safety Council ended. Just two years after the first milk cartons were printed, dairies began to pull the missing kids' pictures from their side panels.

Barbara Huggett: One reason, of course, with the cartons is that the industry shifted to plastic.

Annie Brown: But dairies also started to get tired of the depressing message.

Noreen Gosch: They took away because there were people that were complaining that they thought it might scare children at the breakfast table.

Annie Brown: The famous pediatrician Dr. Benjamin Spock wrote columns condemning the milk carton campaign. It was traumatizing, he said. Kids shouldn't have to face that over their Lucky Charms.

Paul Mokrzycki-Renfro: They see these missing kids kind of staring at them. That milk carton almost demands them to have that conversation: what to do if you see a stranger, or a stranger accosts you...

Roman Mars: That's Paul Mokrzycki-Renfro. He's a historian at the University of Iowa who's been writing his dissertation on child safety, on the milk carton kids, and their effect on us. He believes the milk carton campaign reflected a larger fear that was gripping society at the time: 'stranger danger.'

Annie Brown: Paul studies the way that child safety was talked about at this time — in the news, on the radio, by politicians — and he says that this fear of 'stranger danger' was exploding.

Paul Mokrzycki-Renfro: Folks are kicking around these numbers that are just astronomical. Folks are saying there are 1.8 million missing children in the United States, and "missing" becomes very closely attached to "abducted by strangers."

Roman Mars: But that just wasn't true.

Annie Brown: Every year, 800,000 kids are reported missing to the authorities. That's around 2,000 every day. But, a report from the Department of Justice found that the number of kids taken by strangers every year is only about 115.

Roman Mars: The milk carton campaign led by the National Child Safety Council focused on kids who were kidnapped by strangers, and they were criticized for this. But there were also smaller, more localized campaigns going on that weren't bound by this rule. It was one of these smaller campaigns that ended up featuring the face of a missing girl named Bonnie Loman.

Bonnie Loman: I wasn't kidnapped by strangers, I was kidnapped by people that loved me.

Annie Brown: Bonnie Loman was kidnapped by her mother when she was 3, after her parents got divorced.

Roman Mars: Even though she wasn't kidnapped by a stranger, Bonnie's dad had managed to get her on a milk carton.

Annie Brown: Bonnie had no idea that she had been kidnapped, but her childhood was pretty strange. After taking Bonnie, her mom and stepdad went to Saipan, a tiny island near Guam.

Bonnie Loman: Yeah, yeah, we lived in the woods, like in a shack.

Roman Mars: After a year in Saipan, next was Hawaii. But they were still lying pretty low.

Bonnie Loman: We stayed inside all the time in Hawaii. I recall maybe one or two times being outside.

Annie Brown: Finally, they ended up in Colorado. And her mom and stepdad started to relax a bit. The next door neighbors had a bunch of kids, and Bonnie played at their house all the time.

Bonnie Loman: We would play Barbies and I had my little Barbie case, and I would bring that over.

Roman Mars: Aside from going to her neighbors', Bonnie was hardly ever allowed to leave the house. But on an unusual occasion, her stepdad took her to the supermarket. They needed milk.

Bonnie Loman: I just remember, like, looking and seeing how many cartons of milk there were. Like, nowadays it's, like, whatever brand it is would be facing you. Whereas at that time, all of the pictures were facing you. He grabbed the milk. He was like, "Hey, do you know who that is? Hey, you're famous!" And I saw myself and I was like, "Ooh! Is that me?" And he was like, "Hush, hush..."

Roman Mars: Yes, Bonnie actually saw her own face on a milk carton.

Annie Brown: Though she had no idea what it meant at the time. Bonnie's stepdad bought the milk carton, and when they finished he asked her...

Bonnie Loman: "Do you want it? Do you want to keep it?" And so I remember cutting it out and being like, "Whoa," and staring at the picture. My hair was, like, in a little ponytail on the side, and I was wearing this little dress. And he was like, "Now, you've got to keep it in a safe place." And I must have tossed it in my Barbie case.

Annie Brown: Looking back now, Bonnie sees her stepdad's actions as arrogance.

Bonnie Loman: He was so confident in himself that he could show me that, because nothing's going to happen with it.

Annie Brown: But the next time Bonnie was at the neighbor's house, she left her Barbie case there — with the picture she cut out of her own face on a milk carton.

Bonnie Loman: I remember there were a lot of police showing up. A lot of police showing up.

Roman Mars: Within hours of the neighbor finding the picture, police had swarmed Bonnie's home. She was whisked away and returned to her father. She was 7 at the time.

Annie Brown: But their reunion wasn't easy, at first.

Bonnie Loman: [Crying.] I remember being scared because I didn't know my dad. And all I wanted to do was be with her. It kind of sucked, you know?

Annie Brown: Bonnie is very clear that her mother loved her. But what she didn't know then was that she had been denied some pretty basic pieces of her childhood.

Roman Mars: In the three-and-a-half years she was missing, Bonnie didn't go to school. She hadn't learned to read.

Bonnie Loman: I know I didn't read then, because I would have realized that I was missing, because on the picture it actually said "Missing Child" and then my name and the date.

Annie Brown: After returning to her dad, Bonnie had a pretty normal life. She started school, went on to college, and eventually became a nurse. She has two kids now. She's really happy. She's one of the milk carton campaign's few success stories.

Bonnie Loman: I believe that I am who I am because I was on a milk carton, and I was found, and I had opportunities with my dad growing up that I might not have had with my mom. I was able to live a great life, and I'm grateful for it.

Roman Mars: After only two years, the milk carton campaign had ended. But the faces of missing children were still being printed on all kinds of other things: pizza boxes, plastic grocery bags, utility bills.

Annie Brown: Actually, the utility bill campaign went on for ten years, much longer than the milk cartons. But most of us haven't even heard of it. It didn't stick the way that the milk carton did. Again, here's Paul Mokrzycki-Renfro, the historian.

Paul Mokrzycki-Renfro: It's one of those tropes with which we're all familiar, and it's appeared in novels, films, you know there's a band called The Milk Carton Kids...

Roman Mars: There was something different about seeing a face on the side of a milk carton that really struck a nerve.

Paul Mokrzycki-Renfro: There is a sense of familial unity that I think milk helps to author. Maternal nurturance. And also being this kind of item around which people gather around the breakfast table. So, putting missing kids' faces on that item was quite deliberate and perhaps the reason why that lives on.

[Music.]

Phoebe Judge: That's Roman Mars and reporter Annie Brown.

We'll be reporting stories for a few more days, and back on June 2nd with a brand new story.

Criminal is produced by Lauren Spohrer, Nadia Wilson, and me. Audio mix by Rob Byers. Special thanks to Alice Wilder. Julianne Alexander makes original illustrations for each episode of Criminal. You can see them at thisiscriminal.com. We're on Facebook and Twitter, @CriminalShow.

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We'll be back in a couple of weeks.

I'm Phoebe Judge. This is Criminal.

[Music.]

Jingle: Radiotopia, from PRX.