



Episode 91: The "It" Girl
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Phoebe Judge: This episode contains descriptions of sexual violence and may not be appropriate for everyone. Please use discretion.

Paula Uruburu: The only thing worse than modeling, or it may be equivalent to, would have been acting, going on the stage as a disreputable, morally questionable occupation. And of course her mother allowed her to do both.

Phoebe Judge: Evelyn Nesbit has one of the most famous faces in the world, but these days, not many of us remember her name.

Paula Uruburu: This is the age where a glimpse of stocking was shocking. And as her mother said, "My daughter never modeled in the altogether."

Phoebe Judge: In the late 1800s, an organization called the New York society for the suppression of vice was in full swing. It was founded by a man named Anthony Comstock, and Anthony Comstock was upset about sex. The Civil War had just ended and soldiers had gotten their hands on so much pornography, people were finding it littered all over the ground. Comstock wanted to criminalize erotic pictures along with erotic fiction, songs, depictions of

women on sheet music and playing cards. Anything "calculated to carry impure ideas." And a lot of people agreed with him. In 1873, Congress passed the Comstock Act, prohibiting the transportation of obscene materials through the mail, including information about contraception. But people still want it to look at pictures of naked women.

Paula Uruburu: There was a burgeoning underground industry of, I guess, if you want to call it pornography. And art pictures were included in that — art studies — and the way that, of course, fine artists got around that was by saying that these were mythical figures like Psyche or Aphrodite. So they returned to mythology as a way of justifying having women in these sort of antique, diaphanous robes and gowns and things. And between that, and then the costumes that chorus girls wore, also, which were considered shocking at the time. And here is Evelyn, she's inhabiting both of these worlds at the same time. And she's just barely 16. I mean, everything about her life from the moment that she was discovered as a model, her life was unusual.

Phoebe Judge: Evelyn Nesbit was born on Christmas Day in 1884, in a small Pennsylvania town outside of Pittsburgh. The local paper reported, "She was the most beautiful baby ever born in the County." We're hearing about her from Paula Uruburu, professor of English and Film at Hofstra. Evelyn's father died unexpectedly leaving Mrs. Nesbit with two small children and no idea what to do.

Paula Uruburu: It was the classic... It was like something out of a Charles Dickens novel where the sheriff came and put the eviction notice on the house and all of that. And the mother had no idea how to deal with the finances. And so for a while, they went from family member to family member. And then eventually, I think a year later, her mother because she knew housekeeping, decided she would try to run a boarding house for a time.

Phoebe Judge: The boarding house wasn't doing well. Because Evelyn was so beautiful, her mother made her go door to door to try to collect rent from the men living there. Then Mrs. Nesbit tried to make money as a seamstress, moving her children to Philadelphia, where she hoped someone would hire her. In Philadelphia, Evelyn was discovered.

Paula Uruburu: It sounds like the typical Hollywood scenario, but Evelyn was discovered on the street, actually, by a woman artist who thought that she was extraordinarily beautiful and wanted to use her as a model for painting. She was a fine artist, and Evelyn's mother agreed to let her pose. And then one after another, other artists in the community there started to hear about this model. And then that was the start of her modeling career.

Phoebe Judge: Soon after, the family moved to New York, where Evelyn modeled for artists and appeared in ads for toothpaste, face creams, fur coats, and Whitman Samplers. She was so sought after that she was paid twice what other models made. Her mother was happy to let her do it, because they needed the money.

Paula Uruburu: She came to New York just when the technology makes it possible for them to now reproduce photographs. Because prior to that women's ads, for example, in the ladies magazines, they were illustrations. But once Evelyn's picture gets reproduced, that's when

things changed, and her face became recognizable as the "it" girl. She's the first "it" girl before people knew what "it" was.

Phoebe Judge: Evelyn was cast in the most popular play on Broadway, the Florodora, about young women in the South Pacific making perfume and being pursued by British aristocrats. The show's most famous song was called "Tell Me, Pretty Maiden."

["Tell Me, Pretty Maiden" plays.]

One of the most influential and glamorous architects in New York City went to see the show over and over. Some say he went 40 times, because he was obsessed with the new girl. His name was Stanford White.

Paula Uruburu: Sanford White was this dynamo. And he was somebody who had a vision for New York, and he wanted to transform it. I mean, he was sort of an amazing figure. He managed to have one foot in the world of The Four Hundred and Mrs. Astor and the Robber Barons and the extremely wealthy. Whereas at the same time, he was a denizen of Broadway and friend of the artists and the Bohemians.

Phoebe Judge: He designed mansions for the Vanderbilts, the Tiffanys. He designed the original Madison Square Garden with a giant naked statue of the goddess Diana on the roof. And he was famous for coming up with these wild, over the top events, filling the old Metropolitan Opera House with 15,000 white roses, turning a restaurant into the Court of Versailles. For the centennial of George Washington's inauguration he built an enormous ornate arch. The arch was so popular that New Yorkers raised the money to keep it around. And it's there in Washington Square Park today. He had red hair and a big red mustache. Newspapers described him as masterful and intense. He had a lot of power in New York, and his wife was from an important and wealthy family, too.

Paula Uruburu: He was just this whirlwind figure, who had at the same time an incredible appetite for beauty and beautiful objects, which is where I think Evelyn fits in. [Laughs.]

Phoebe Judge: It was the beginning of a new world of celebrity, money, gossip. Mark Twain called it the Gilded Age, glittering and beautiful on the surface and absolutely rotten underneath.

I'm Phoebe Judge. This is Criminal.

[Music.]

After seeing Evelyn perform night after night, Stanford White arranged to meet her.

Paula Uruburu: He managed to get one of his chorus girlfriends, who befriended Evelyn, to bring her to a luncheon at one of his apartments around the city that he kept for these purposes. He called his Snuggeries.

Phoebe Judge: This particular Snuggery was a nondescript building on West 24th Street, above a toy shop owned by FAO Schwartz. When Evelyn and her friend got out of the cab, she wanted to go in and look at the mechanical toys, but her friend, who'd been there before, pulled

her through a narrow door that opened automatically. Evelyn later wrote, "The sudden plunge from that dingy street entrance into this room was breathtaking. The predominating color was a wonderful red. Heavy red velvet curtains shut out all the daylight. There was a table set for four." She liked the apartment, but she did not like Stanford White. She found him "appalling and terribly old." She was 16. He was 48.

Paula Uruburu: They were having this feast and he says, "I want to show you this room that I have upstairs." And they went up a set of stairs and there in this room with the high ceiling was this beautiful red velvet swing that was attached to the ceiling. And also attached to the ceiling was a Japanese paper parasol. And he said to Evelyn, "Do you want to ride on the swing?" And he put her on the swing and pushed her and encouraged her to go as high as she could to try to kick through the parasol. And that was one of the afternoon's entertainments, was to ride on the swing, the famous red velvet swing.

Phoebe Judge: After that first meeting Stanford White decided that everything about Evelyn was perfect, except for one thing: her teeth. They were good, but not as good as he wanted them to be. He sent her to a dentist to, as he said, "Satisfy a purely aesthetic urge." And he paid the bill. He paid for a lot of things.

Paula Uruburu: He began this program of patronage of her. She became his "protégé." He moved her and her mother into a beautiful apartment that he decorated specifically for her. Paying for her brother to go to school, he sent her brother to military academy.

Phoebe Judge: He visited Evelyn and her mother many mornings with gifts, often books he wanted Evelyn to read. He arranged for her to take piano lessons. He made appointments for her to model for his friends; 'real artists,' he said, not the 'hacks' she'd been posing for. And he introduced her to an artist named Charles Dana Gibson.

Paula Uruburu: She became one of Gibson's favorite models and the Gibson girl today still, when they had that series of stamps that came out about the century, a while ago, sure enough, Evelyn's picture was the Gibson girl stamp that they put out. So it's such an iconic image of that gilded age and she is it.

Phoebe Judge: What was a Gibson girl?

Paula Uruburu: A Gibson girl was, really, Charles Dana Gibson took the idea of the New Woman, which was threatening to the old guard, but his idea of the American girl, if you want to use that term, was she was tall and statuesque and she was seductive, but without being sexualized. And she was usually depicted in his illustrations as an heiress, as being healthy, as participating in the newest trends, whether it's riding a bicycle or playing tennis or golf. And they didn't need men, necessarily. It was really the ideal image of the New Woman. And that's what he created.

Phoebe Judge: One of Gibson's most famous drawings of Evelyn Nesbit is called "The Eternal Question."

Paula Uruburu: It's a profile image and in it, her hair is piled up on her head, but also there are some curls that fall over her shoulder and it looks like a question mark. And Freud famously says, "The eternal question is: what does a woman want?" And Gibson played on that idea. What is this creature? What is this new woman? How are we supposed to respond to her? What does she represent? And Evelyn is the Gibson girl, she is the eternal question. What is a woman wanting? And it's brilliant, because in that period a girl wore her hair down in curls. And then when she was 16, she lost the short skirts and wore long dresses and her hair then was put up to indicate that she was a woman now. And what's brilliant about the eternal question is that you have it both ways. She's got her hair up and she's got it down. So it's some interesting transitional figure between the old and the new, between the old and the young, actually.

Phoebe Judge: Stanford White continued to be a father figure to Evelyn. And he became very close with her mother, winning her trust completely. He talked to Mrs. Nesbit about her friends and family back in Pennsylvania. He said it was important not to lose touch and encouraged her to go home for a visit.

Paula Uruburu: And her mother didn't want to leave Evelyn by herself in the city. At this point, Evelyn is now modeling in the daytime and performing on Broadway at night. And he says, "Don't worry. I'll take care of her." And her mother left her in the care of White. And he told Evelyn he was going to be having a party at Madison Square Garden Tower and that she should come.

Phoebe Judge: When she arrived, there was no one else there. He said, "Isn't it too bad? All the others have turned us down." He told her that they'd have their own party. He gave her a gift, a toy bank he'd bought in London and a glass of champagne. And then another and another. Up until this point, he kept a close eye on her drinking, never wanting her to have more than one glass, but this night was different. He took her up a staircase she'd never noticed before. At the top, a small studio decorated with tapestries and mirrors and antiques. He opened the tapestries to reveal an even smaller secret room with a four poster, canopy bed, surrounded by mirrors. All around the top of the bed were light bulbs that changed colors.

Paula Uruburu: She says, I like to use her description, she says, she went into the room a virgin and she did not come out one. And that was the night that she woke up and she was basically nude next to a naked Stanford White. And he says, "You're mine now, and you're my kitten." And it's awful.

Phoebe Judge: She had no memory of what had happened. When she woke up and saw her reflection in the mirrors, she screamed. Before 1895 to prosecute someone for rape you had to prove a woman fought back. After 1895 sex with anyone under 18 carried a minimum sentence of 10 years. Stanford White told Evelyn that nothing unusual had happened, that everyone did it and that, "A girl must never talk." He'd remind her of this, saying simply, "Don't talk, Evelyn."

Paula Uruburu: Evelyn, I mean, you have to try to remember that she's 16 when she meets White. After her father died, she was living in extreme poverty and living from hand to mouth and suddenly, she's with one of the most dynamic, attractive people in New York. White was somebody that men and women found irresistible in terms of his personality, in terms of his

charm. The way she describes it in her letter, she said, "It was like the force of an earthquake." It was a seismic force that he had. And as I said, anybody who knew White, whether it was as the artist or as the entrepreneur, or as the art connoisseur, he was just this magnetic figure. And so probably in her naïveté as a 16 year old, she thought, "Oh, he's going to maybe leave his wife for me." Which he never intended to do. So yeah, it was a very uneven relationship, to say the least.

Phoebe Judge: For Evelyn's 17th birthday, Stanford White filled his Madison Square Garden apartment with flowers, covering every inch of the place. And he covered the flower petals with confectioner's sugar to make them look like they'd been dusted by snow. And he was just getting started. Her birthday gifts included two diamond solitaire rings, a large pearl on a platinum chain, a set of white fox furs, and a ruby and diamond ring. She called him Stanny Claus. She was thrilled to be the center of his attention. He would pinch her shoulders and say he was feeling for her wings. Neither of them had any idea they were being watched.

Evelyn had been cast in a musical called *The Wild Rose*, and a strange man attended dozens of performances. He always sat in the front row. Following almost exactly in the footsteps of Stanford White, the strange man asked one of the girls in the play to bring Evelyn to lunch so he could meet her. Evelyn agreed. The man called himself Mr. Monroe.

Paula Uruburu: He met her, he got down and grabbed the hem of her dress and kissed it. And he said, "Do you know you're the most beautiful girl in New York?" And she was actually horrified.

Phoebe Judge: About a week later at a pre-show dinner, Evelyn ran into Mr. Monroe again. They were seated next to one another, which was not a coincidence. This time, very theatrically, the man told her that his name was not Mr. Monroe. He revealed his real identity, the heir to a \$40 million fortune, Harry Thaw.

Paula Uruburu: Harry was this incredibly spoiled and apparently very unstable young man, who then wanted to become the toast of the town and came from Pittsburgh to New York. And because he was so odd and because he was, let's face it, he was from Pittsburgh. I don't want to cast aspersions on Pittsburgh, but the New York crowds considered him just this insane outsider, who did things like ride a horse up the steps into the Union Club and used to show off by lighting his cigars with hundred dollar bills and things like this. So he'd been kicked out of Harvard. He'd been kicked out of law school.

Phoebe Judge: It didn't actually matter. He didn't need to work. His mother gave him a monthly allowance of \$80,000, which would be about \$2 million a month today. He spent his time traveling around the world, getting into fights, and asking his mother to bail him out. Like Stanford White, Harry Thaw was obsessed with young and beautiful Broadway actresses. And specifically, he was obsessed with their virginity.

Paula Uruburu: He would actually run ads and have young girls come to his apartment with the idea that he was going to be a dramatic coach. And he would instead scald them in bathtubs and handcuff them and beat them with a dog whip, and tell them that they were bad.

Phoebe Judge: He believed he was saving them in some way. His mother spent tens of thousands of dollars paying them not to press charges. Evelyn didn't know about any of this, but she knew she was not interested. When Harry Thaw sent two dozen pairs of silk stockings to her house, she sent them back. He sent a Steinway grand piano, she sent that back too. He proposed, she declined. She was in love with Stanford White. She believed they were going to be together forever.

Paula Uruburu: And as she saw that he was paying attention to other chorus girls as well, she didn't like that. And I think she started to... She turned 17, she became maybe somewhat wiser or somewhat aware that she needed to do something. And so, that's when she started a relationship with John Barrymore, I think to make White jealous in the hopes that he would leave his wife.

Phoebe Judge: Somehow, Mrs. Nesbit had no problem with Evelyn spending many evenings with Stanford White. But when she started spending time with someone age appropriate, she panicked and sent Evelyn to boarding school. She enrolled at the DeMille School run by Cecil B. DeMille's mother. Stanford White paid her tuition. While she was at school, she needed an emergency appendectomy. Evelyn's mother couldn't reach Stanford White, so she contacted that other wealthy middle-aged man hovering around her teenage daughter, Harry Thaw. He sent one of the finest doctors in New York to operate on Evelyn and then offered to pay for a recuperative trip to Europe for Evelyn and her mother, and he would go along too. Early in the trip, Evelyn and her mother were fighting so badly, mostly about her mother spending Evelyn's money on clothes for herself, that her mother insisted on going back to America. And so Harry and Evelyn were alone.

Paula Uruburu: They were in Paris and here was this guy who was kind of weird. But he was constantly professing his love for her and how beautiful she was. And then one night in Paris, he cornered her in her room and said, "Tell me about Stanford White. Tell me what he did to you. I know he did something to you." And she told him, and he broke down, crying and hysterical and saying, "Oh my God, that's terrible, terrible."

Phoebe Judge: He began to cry and pressed her for more details. And they stayed up all night talking. Evelyn was moved by his reaction. They continued to travel together, and Harry would bring up Stanford White constantly. When they visited the birthplace of Joan of Arc, he wrote in the guest book, "She would not have been a virgin if Stanford White had been around." They moved on to Germany, where Harry had rented an old Gothic castle, secluded up a steep mountain. There were two servants in the castle, and one night Harry Thaw sent them both away. Evelyn woke up to find him standing beside her bed, naked with a whip. He attacked her. He tore her nightgown off and hit her and said things about penance for her sinful behavior. He raped her. The next day, he behaved as if nothing had happened. Evelyn asked to see a doctor. She was badly injured and still recovering from the appendectomy. He took her to a doctor, who ignored the bruises and marks all over her body. She was completely trapped.

Eventually, they went back to Paris, where she ran into one of Stanford White's friends, an older woman who got Evelyn out of there. Back home in New York, she realized that she was completely on her own. Her mother wouldn't speak to her. Stanford White was distracted. She

worried that at 17, she was perhaps already too old to keep his attention. Harry Thaw sent an entire florist shop of flowers to apologize. When she refused to see him, he sent others to apologize on his behalf. He wrote her letters, promising that if she would only marry him, things would be better. He said he would be a different person. He said he would be like a monk. This went on for two years. On April 5th, 1905, they were married. She wore black.

Paula Uruburu: And for a brief time, it seemed like maybe this was going to be okay. And then of course, he starts coming into her room at night and saying, "Tell me again what Stanford White did to you. Tell me." And she realized that part of the reason why he married her was because he wanted to relive this experience over and over again about White. He was so obsessed with him.

Phoebe Judge: Harry Thaw began to carry a gun.

[Music.]

In our next episode, we'll pick up the story.

Paula Uruburu: It was very clear that none of the people in the center of this tragedy, neither Evelyn nor White nor Thaw, was exactly what they had been initially depicted as.

Phoebe Judge: Criminal is produced by Lauren Spohrer, Nadia Wilson, and me. Audio mix by Rob Byers. Mathilde Urfalino is our intern. Special thanks to Mara Egan. Julianne Alexander makes original illustrations for each episode of Criminal. You can see them at thisiscriminal.com. We're on Facebook and Twitter, @CriminalShow.

Criminal is recorded in the studios of North Carolina Public Radio, WUNC. We're a proud member of Radiotopia from PRX, a collection of the best podcasts around. Shows like Love and Radio. They make complicated, beautifully produced stories that you won't hear anywhere else. And their new season is starting now. It's about where the individual ends and the collective begins. Churches, cults, political parties — you name it.

[Love and Radio excerpt begins.]

Speaker 1: I was writing prescriptions for myself, for a controlled substance.

Speaker 2: What I don't like about liberalism is the nuance.

Speaker 3: She got in the van and she was not speaking to us at that point, which was good because when we got gas, she didn't scream.

Speaker 4: I just have this weird compulsion to look up infection.

Speaker 5: I don't know if we can say this kind of stuff on the radio.

Speaker 4: I'm just fascinated with things that are...

Speaker 5: What do you wish on your enemies?

Speaker 6: There was nothing I could do or say to change the slow motion crash.

Speaker 7: And I thought, "I am standing in the breath of God."

[Excerpt ends.]

Phoebe Judge: Go listen.

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Jingle: Radiotopia, from PRX.