THE TRUTH NEVER STANDS IN THE WAY OF A GOOD STORY

Jan Harold Brunvand

With a Chapter on the Heroic Hacker
by Erik Brunvand

UNIVERSITY OF ILLINOIS PRESS
URBANA AND CHICAGO

Manufactured in the United States of America
♾ This book is printed on acid-free paper.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Brunvand, Jan Harold.
The truth never stands in the way of a good story /
Jan Harold Brunvand ; with a chapter on the heroic
hacker by Erik Brunvand.
p. cm.
Includes bibliographical references and index.
ISBN 0-252-02424-9 (cloth)
1. Urban folklore—United States.
2. Legends—United States.
3. United States—Social life and customs.
I. Brunvand, Erik.
II. Title.
GR105.B716 2000
398.2'0973'091732—dc21 99-6465
CIP
C 5 4 3 2 1

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Typeset in 10/13 Sabon
with Green display
Designed by Paula Newcomb
Composed by Jim Proefrock
at the University of Illinois Press
Manufactured by Thomson-Shore, Inc.

University of Illinois Press
1325 South Oak Street
Champaign, IL 61820-6903
www.press.uillinois.edu

CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

My collecting and studying of urban legends for many years has benefited greatly from the voluminous correspondence with readers of my publications. On December 15, 1989, for example, Ron Thurston, a high school teacher in Fort Collins, Colorado, queried me about a story he had recently been told:

> Have you heard this one? One of my wife's colleagues has a friend who knows someone who tells this story: When she was young and only recently married, she was having her first dinner party and had prepared a huge baked salmon. Just before the guests arrived, she discovered that the cat had gotten up on the counter and nibbled on the freshly baked fish. After considering her investment, as well as all of the alternative entrees at this late moment, she decided to simply clean it up as best she could, turn the salmon over to hide the tell-tale nibblings, and serve it.
>
> It was a fine dinner, enjoyed by all. After the last guest left, she and her husband went to let the cat back in. To their horror they found the cat just outside the front door—dead. Fearing that the fish was tainted and had caused the cat's death, they anguished over what to do. Finally they called all their guests and told them the story. Everyone, including the hosts, went to the hospital and had their stomachs pumped. Returning home after their ordeal, they were met by their neighbor, who was anxious to explain about the cat.
>
> It seems that the cat had been hit by a car and must have suffered internal injuries. The neighbor went on to say how he had brought the body of the cat to their house, but didn't want to interrupt the party he saw in progress, so he just left it by the front door.

I had, of course, heard Ron Thurston's story—*many* times. In fact, I had dubbed it "The Poisoned Pussycat at the Party" in my 1981 book *The*

Vanishing Hitchhiker and had reported a version from a 1963 San Francisco newspaper column in which the cat had been fed some wild mushrooms. I also heard a mushroom version in Romania in 1981, and that same year a German tabloid reported a similar incident that concluded with the cat, after eating some mushrooms, suffering from apparent convulsions, sending the family racing to the hospital. The Germans returned, weak and queasy, to find that their cat had delivered kittens.

The "poisoned" pet legend has been widely told both in the United States and abroad for decades, and it popped up again in the 1989 film *Her Alibi,* then yet again in the 1994 best-seller by John Berendt, *Midnight in the Garden of Good and Evil.* But the oral tradition of the story continued unabated, and many other readers have queried me about it, including, on September 24, 1990, Jean Wendland of North Royalton, Ohio:

> I heard a suspicious story recently, and would appreciate your opinion on its credibility.
>
> My sister's boyfriend knows a family who had this unfortunate incident happen to them. They were the hosts of a backyard barbecue, and were grilling fish. The hostess found their cat sampling the fish before it was served to the guests and chased it away. The guests, of course were never told of the cat's intrusion, and they all enjoyed what was left of the fish.
>
> Upon finishing the meal, and preparing to return home, they found the cat dead in the driveway. The hostess notified all that the fish must have been tainted, as the poor kitty had tasted some and met his maker. The host and hostess and all the guests made a beeline for the local emergency room where they had their stomachs pumped.
>
> Returning home, the host of the ill-fated barbecue found a note on his door from his neighbor: "Please accept our apologies for running over your cat. We will be happy to replace him."

The insistence on the truth of this bizarre story, the attribution to specific friends of friends, the age of the story, and (most of all) the variations in details among the different versions are all hallmarks of the modern urban legend, a lively category of contemporary folklore that has fascinated me since I began studying American folklore in the early 1950s. Presently I have on file thousands of letters, clippings, and photocopies—plus transcripts of oral versions and offprints of scholarly articles—all documenting several hundred urban legend plots in countless variant texts.

The same kind of narrative traditions exhibited in the poisoned pet stories are evident in another popular urban legend, as reported in a letter to the travel editor of the *Washington Post,* published on May 26, 1991:

Friends recently showed us the letter in the Feb. 24 Travel section about "grandmothernapping."

While living in Frankfurt, Germany, in the early '60s, our maid and her family went on vacation to Spain. They were a week late in returning and offered as their excuse the amazing tale of a grandmother dying there, and how—to avoid problems with Spanish police and to save money at border crossings—they wrapped their Oma (Granny) in a tent and covertly slipped her across borders back to Germany for a proper burial. However, when they stopped to eat, someone stole their van, with Granny aboard. The maid said she needed a few more days off to settle matters.

We were, of course, horrified and sympathetic. Later, we told the story to a young German lawyer and were flabbergasted when he cracked up laughing. This is a scenario, he said, that is commonly presented to first-year law students in Germany with instructions to determine and list all possible infractions of local and international law that could be involved.

We subsequently changed maids.

Harry V. Ryder Jr.
Arlington

"The Runaway Grandmother," as folklorists call this story, is another classic urban legend discussed in my first book. It has had extensive international circulation since at least the 1930s. The story has been echoed in novels by authors as diverse as John Steinbeck (in *The Grapes of Wrath,* 1939) and Anthony Burgess (in *The Piano Players,* 1986), as well as furnishing a gag for the 1983 film *National Lampoon's Vacation.* Variations include having the body stolen from where it was stashed in a canoe tied to the top of the car or in a boat being towed behind the car. Almost invariably, the family has stopped to eat when the vehicle and the corpse are stolen.

Not all the urban legends currently circulating are classics. In the late fall of 1990 a shocking story suddenly appeared concerning a dreadful mishap that befell a couple while they were on vacation in a tropical paradise. Here is a version sent to me on March 19, 1991, by the Denver journalist Alan Dumas:

This tale was told to me by an earnest young man who swears it happened recently to some friends of his parents.

An older couple took a long-anticipated trip to Costa Rica, and when they arrived they found to their dismay that their luggage had been stolen. The thieves had spared nothing except the couple's toilet articles and their camera case. It was assumed that the thieves didn't want the couple's per-

sonal toilet items, and authorities speculated that in their haste—loaded down with the other luggage—the miscreants simply were unable to manage the camera equipment.

Well, the couple were determined not to let the incident ruin their vacation. They bought some new clothes and, in fact, had quite an enjoyable two weeks. They took a lot of pictures.

Upon returning home they promptly had their film developed so they could share the experience with their friends. Having shot color slides, they quickly loaded them into a holder and began showing them to their kids. Halfway through the presentation they ran across a slide they hadn't taken. It must, in fact, have been taken by the thieves who stole their luggage.

It was a close-up picture of the couple's toothbrushes sticking out of two large hairy butts.

Absolutely true, I was told.

I have on file about sixty other reports—both oral and published—of this "true" incident as it supposedly happened in Jamaica, the Bahamas, Bermuda, or St. Maarten in the Caribbean and in other scattered locations from Australia to Europe. So far, however, nobody has stepped forward claiming to be the victims, nor has anyone produced the actual photograph.

Lately the Internet has become a prime medium for the rapid circulation and discussion of urban legends, although the people who forward the stories electronically are not always aware of their folkloric nature. One of the most repeated Internet legends is an updated version of the expensive recipe story discussed in chapter 4. Here's a typical example from my files:

This is a true story that was forwarded to me. Read it and raise an eyebrow. Bake the cookies and enjoy them. Forward it to all you know!

My daughter & I had just finished a salad at Neiman-Marcus Cafe in Dallas & decided to have a small dessert. Because both of us are such cookie lovers, we decided to try the "Neiman-Marcus Cookie." It was so excellent that I asked if they would give me the recipe and the waitress said with a small frown, "I'm afraid not." Well, I said, would you let me buy the recipe? With a cute smile, she said, "Yes." I asked how much, and she responded, "Only two fifty, it's a great deal!" I said with approval, just add it to my tab. Thirty days later, I received my VISA statement from Neiman-Marcus and it was $285.00. I looked again and I remembered I had only spent $9.95 for two salads and about $20.00 for a scarf. As I glanced at the bottom of the statement, it said, "Cookie Recipe—$250.00." That's outrageous!! I called Neiman's Accounting Dept. and told them the waitress said it was "two-fifty," which clearly does not mean "two hundred and fifty dollars" by any *POSSIBLE* interpretation of the phrase. Neiman-

Marcus refused to budge. They would not refund my money, because according to them, "What the waitress told you is not our problem. You have already seen the recipe—we absolutely will not refund your money at this point." I explained to her the criminal statues which govern fraud in Texas, I threatened to refer them to the Better Business Bureau and the State's Attorney General for engaging in fraud. I was basically told, "Do what you want, we don't give a crap, and we're not refunding your money." I waited, thinking of how I could get even, or even try and get any of my money back. I just said, "Okay, you folks got my $250, and now I'm going to have $250.00 worth of fun." I told her that I was going to see to it that every cookie lover in the United States with an e-mail account has a $250.00 cookie recipe from Neiman-Marcus . . . for free. She replied, "I wish you wouldn't do this." I said, "Well, you should have thought of that before you ripped me off," and slammed down the phone on her.

So, here it is!!! Please, please, please pass it on to everyone you can possibly think of. I paid $250 dollars for this . . . I don't want Neiman-Marcus to *ever* get another penny off of this recipe . . .

Neiman-Marcus Cookies

Ingredients:

2 cups butter
4 cups flower
2 tsp. soda
2 cups sugar
5 cups blended oatmeal**
24 oz. chocolate chips
2 cups brown sugar
1 tsp. salt
1 8 oz. Hershey Bar (grated)
4 eggs
2 tsp. baking powder
3 cups chopped nuts (your choice)
2 tsp. vanilla

Procedures

**Measure oatmeal and blend in a blender to a fine powder.

Cream the butter and both sugars. Add eggs and vanilla; mix together with flour, oatmeal, salt, baking powder, and soda. Add chocolate chips, Hershey Bar, and nuts. Roll into balls and place two inches apart on a cookie sheet. Bake for 10 minutes at 375 degrees. Makes 112 cookies.

Yes, it does say "statues" and "flower" in about half of the Internet postings of this recipe, an indication that the item was probably forwarded without a close reading. The odd addition of "blended" oatmeal is another standard inclusion in this recipe. Just what effect a single eight-ounce Hershey Bar would have on a recipe for 112 cookies is not clear. What *is* perfectly clear, however, is that the story is purely fictional. (See the Neiman-Marcus Web site at http://www.neimanmarcus.com for the company's light-hearted response to the decades-old story in this latest version.)

These examples of just three recent urban legends suggest the variety and spread of such stories. And even this small sample demonstrates some of the common topics of modern legends—cars, death, crime, family emergencies, pets, commerce, and the like—as well as some of the typical themes—misunderstandings, poetic justice, business rip-offs, and revenge. Another clear lesson here is the important role of the mass media and electronic communications in spreading and confirming (or debunking) urban legends. And, of course, it all goes to show that the truth never stands in the way of a good story.

At this point the question of how we might define such a diverse and ever-changing genre of modern folk narratives must be raised. Here is my own attempt at definition, quoted from the latest edition of my textbook, *The Study of American Folklore:* "a story in a contemporary setting (not necessarily a big city), reported as a true individual experience, with traditional variants that indicate its legendary character. Urban legends (also called 'contemporary legends' and 'modern legends') typically have three good reasons for their popularity: a suspenseful or humorous story line, an element of actual belief, and a warning or moral that is either stated or implied."[1]

More concisely, I attempted another phrasing of the definition in the reference work I edited entitled *American Folklore: An Encyclopedia:* "an apocryphal contemporary story, told as true but incorporating traditional motifs, and usually attributed to a friend of a friend (FOAF)."[2]

But the International Society for Contemporary Legend Research (ISCLR, founded in 1988) bypasses the question of definition in its own mission statement, stating simply: "We study 'modern' and 'urban' legends, and also any legend circulating actively.[3]

During the 1980s the urban legend came into its own as a major topic for research in folklore, but there were some notable earlier studies. Alexander Woollcott included legends of the city in his 1934 book *While Rome Burns* as well as an extended discussion of "The Disappearing Lady" legend, which he called "a fair specimen of folklore in the making."[4] In 1941 Marie Bonaparte published a study of "The Corpse in the Car" legend in the psychiatric journal *American Imago,*[5] an essay she incorporated into her book *Myths of War,*[6] which also included the legends "The Doctored Wine" and "The Devil-Jew."

American folklorists began to collect "urban belief tales" (as they were then called) in the 1940s and 1950s. Notable early publications include Richard K. Beardsley and Rosalie Hankey's 1942–43 work on "The Vanishing Hitchhiker";[7] Ernest Baughman's 1945 article on "The Fatal Initi-

ation";[8] J. Russell Reaver's 1952 article on "The Poison Dress";[9] and B. A. Botkin's 1954 book *Sidewalks of America,* which contained versions of several urban legends.[10]

Richard M. Dorson's 1959 textbook, *American Folklore,*[11] was a landmark in American urban legend studies; as I discuss in chapter 1, it included a number of "folktales and legends of the big city" in its chapter on modern folklore. Another ground-breaking publication was the first issue of the journal *Indiana Folklore* in 1968. For a number of years thereafter, in that forum and elsewhere, Linda Dégh and her students at Indiana University documented and analyzed many urban legends. Folklorists from then on, both American and foreign, became intrigued with analyzing the history, variety, persistence, and widespread acceptance as literal truth of such bizarre yet plausible modern narratives as "The Death Car," "The Hook," "The Kentucky Fried Rat," "The Snake in the Blanket," "The Spider in the Hairdo," and "The Roommate's Death."

My introduction to the genre came in the undergraduate class I took from Richard M. Dorson at Michigan State University in the early 1950s and in my graduate work with Dorson and others at Indiana University from 1957 to 1961. However, the stimulus to specialize in urban legend studies came from my teaching at the University of Idaho (1961–65), Southern Illinois University (1965–66), and the University of Utah (1966–96). I urged my students to explore the folklore of their own lives and times, and they responded often by producing wonderful collections and studies of urban legends. Eventually, I researched the subject and developed a lecture on urban legends that I delivered at Northern Arizona University in February 1980 and revised for publication in *Psychology Today* in the June 1980 issue.[12] I had no idea at the time that this was a turning point in my career, but before long I found myself much more deeply involved in urban legend studies than in anything else in folklore research.

Exploring this interest further, and drawing on earlier publications by my fellow folklorists, I published my first book on the subject in 1981—*The Vanishing Hitchhiker: American Urban Legends and Their Meanings.*[13] In this ambitiously titled book I dealt with thirty-six classic modern legends, but hardly exhausted the genre, as I had at first imagined. Three years later, using stories and clippings sent in by readers, and supplemented by my own wider study of the genre, I published a sequel, *The Choking Doberman and Other "New" Urban Legends,*[14] but even in this book I had only scratched the surface. Subsequently I published *The Mexican Pet: More "New" Urban Legends and Some Old Favorites, Curses! Broiled Again!: The Hottest Urban Legends Going,* and *The Baby Train and Other*

Lusty Urban Legends.[15] Also, from January 1987 through June 1992 I wrote "Urban Legends," a twice-weekly newspaper column distributed by United Feature Syndicate, and in 1999 W. W. Norton published my updated comprehensive urban legend anthology, this one entitled *Too Good to Be True.* (The title suggests that urban legends, although told as true, are too neat, ironic, and coincidental to be taken for absolute truth, especially since the same stories are attributed to so many different settings.)

Urban legend studies continue to thrive. International conferences on modern legends were held at the Centre for English Cultural Tradition and Language at the University of Sheffield, in July 1982 and 1983; at least two sessions on urban legends were held during the Eighth Congress of the International Society for Folk Narrative Research in Bergen, Norway, in June 1984. The ISCLR now holds annual meetings, either in the United States or abroad, and publishes a newsletter, *FOAFtale News,* and an annual journal, *Contemporary Legend.* Papers on urban legends are given at most national and regional folklore meetings nowadays, and a steady flow of books and articles on the subject continues. An indication of the popularity of these studies is that fully 1,116 items are listed in Gillian Bennett and Paul Smith's 1993 compilation *Contemporary Legend: A Folklore Bibliography.*[16]

I originally wrote the chapters of this book—each a case study of one legend or of a related group of legends—as either conference papers, academic journal articles, or both. Each essay has been revised and updated for this publication, and the original sources are indicated in the notes. In general, my approach is historical and comparative, since I am convinced that interpretations and analyses must be based on a large collection of data plus the clearest possible account of each story's history and development. To illustrate how the stories accumulate in my collection and how interpretations may emerge from documentation of the widespread variations, I often follow a first-person and chronological structure. Eventually, then, I am able to speculate about such matters as what social-cultural patterns constitute the "real" topics of the "Baby Roast" legend, why the cake baked from the expensive recipe is red, what a recent gang crime legend says about anxieties of our time, and how the supposed tension between science and religion is depicted in a quasi-scientific "evangelegend" (as another commentator has dubbed "The Missing Day in Time"). Readers will doubtless find other meanings to ponder in these stories, and I hope that my studies will suggest some approaches, techniques, and sources useful for further research.

Some of the legends studied here are classics of the genre (i.e., "The Baby Roast," "The Expensive Recipe," "The Exploding Toilet," and "The Ghost in Search of Help"). Others have only recently appeared as part of this ongoing narrative tradition (i.e., "The Brain Drain," "Lights Out!" "The Stunned Deer," and "The Story of Mel, a Real Programmer," which my son Erik Brunvand explores in chapter 13). In nearly every case, however, networks of modern media have transmitted the stories (via e-mail, fax, broadcasting, and print) beyond the workings, most familiar to folklorists, of face-to-face oral tradition. For much of this ephemeral material that races along the electronic superhighway I am indebted to the thousands of readers who have sent me letters, clippings, and photocopies. It is obvious that folklore nowadays travels by much faster and more modern methods than mere word-of-mouth transmission, even though the old oral channels are still flowing vigorously.

As a preliminary to our individual studies, we must consider briefly several problems in terminology for all urban legend studies. The term *urban* itself is the first difficulty, because many of the stories involved are modern without specifically concerning cities. In fact, the suburbs more often than the inner cities are the scenes depicted in urban legends. Second, *legend* may not always be the most accurate term, since a number of these items are often told as mere unverified reports (that is, rumors) rather than as plotted narratives, or as jokes; and not all of them are universally believed. (Belief is assumed to be a hallmark of the legend.) Most American folklorists, however, are content to refer to stories like "The Boyfriend's Death" and "Red Velvet Cake" or even to the less structured reports like "Alligators in the Sewers" and "The Procter & Gamble Trademark" as legends, recognizing that there is usually some narrative content to these traditions and that at least some people tell them as true. Substitutes for the term *urban* that have been suggested include *modern, contemporary, adolescent,* and *mercantile,* but *urban legend* is still the most common label for this kind of folk story.

Other difficulties arise with the "Americanness" and "newness" of urban legends collected and studied in the United States. In *The Vanishing Hitchhiker* I identified a few international variants of "American urban legends," but I gave the overwhelming impression that this was a largely native folkloric product. I was wrong about this, since most of the legends turned out to be international. As for the modernity of urban legends, the word *new* in the subtitles of my two sequels was put within quotation marks because the antiquity that was established for a few stories

in the first book was much more impressive for several included in the second and third books. Also, as folklorists in other countries have collected and studied their own urban legends, the age and international character of the stories have become well established.

A last problem with terminology lies in the names assigned to individual legends by folklorists. Sometimes an arbitrary label like "The Solid Cement Cadillac" or "The Mouse in the Coke" suggests that these stories are static entities with consistent content, whereas they are really fluid oral narratives that change constantly as they are performed by oral storytellers in their dramatic reconstructions based on more-or-less clearly remembered traditional motifs. Further, the supernatural nature of "The Vanishing Hitchhiker" legend (in which a ghost haunts the roadside) is atypical for this narrative tradition, since few other urban legends have any consistent supernatural content. "The Choking Doberman"—a crime story—is, perhaps, a more appropriate piece to represent modern oral narratives, although not all urban legends are necessarily horror stories and certainly not all urban legends may be traced to such ancient roots as this one has.

The upshot of all this is that the field of urban legends—both the story types themselves and the scholarly study of them—still seems to be in its infancy. We should expect many more advances and discoveries as the research continues.

A Note on Type and Motif References

All mentions of folktale *types* and narrative *motifs* in this book refer to two major publications consulted by all folklorists for the classification and analysis of traditional stories. Rather than cite these references repeatedly, I will list them here:

Type refers to the stories indexed in the English version of Antti Aarne's 1928 catalog *Verzeichnis der Märchentypen* as translated and enlarged by the American folklorist Stith Thompson and published most recently as *Folklore Fellows Communications* no. 184 (1961) under the title *The Types of the Folktale.*

Motif refers to the myriad individual narrative units indexed in Stith Thompson's *Motif-Index of Folk-Literature* in the revised edition published in six volumes from 1955 to 1958 by Indiana University Press.

An important related work is Ernest W. Baughman's 1966 *Type and Motif-Index of the Folktales of England and North America* published by Indiana University Press as volume twenty in the Indiana University Folklore Series.

Notes

1. Jan Harold Brunvand, *The Study of American Folklore,* 4th ed. (New York: W. W. Norton, 1998), 205.

2. Jan Harold Brunvand, ed., *American Folklore: An Encyclopedia* (New York: Garland, 1996), 730.

3. This is stated in every issue of *FOAFtale News* and in the membership information for ISCLR.

4. Alexander Woollcott, *While Rome Burns* (New York: Viking Press, 1934), 93.

5. Marie Bonaparte, "The Myth of the Corpse in the Car," *American Imago* 2 (1941): 105–26.

6. Marie Bonaparte, *Myths of War,* trans. John Rodker (London: Imago, 1947), originally published as *Mythes de Guerre* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1946).

7. Richard K. Beardsley and Rosalie Hankey, "The Vanishing Hitchhiker," *California Folklore Quarterly* 1 (1942): 155–77, 303–55; 2 (1943): 13–25.

8. Ernest Baughman, "The Fatal Initiation," *Hoosier Folklore Bulletin* 4 (1945): 49–55.

9. J. Russell Reaver, "Embalmed Alive: A Developing Urban Ghost Tale," *New York Folklore Quarterly* 8 (1952): 217–20.

10. B. A. Botkin, *Sidewalks of America* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1954), 520–29.

11. Richard M. Dorson, *American Folklore* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1959).

12. Jan Harold Brunvand, "Urban Legends: Folklore for Today," *Psychology Today,* June 1980, 50–62.

13. Jan Harold Brunvand, *The Vanishing Hitchhiker: American Urban Legends and Their Meanings* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1981).

14. Jan Harold Brunvand, *The Choking Doberman and Other "New" Urban Legends* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1984).

15. Jan Harold Brunvand, *The Mexican Pet: More "New" Urban Legends and Some Old Favorites* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1986); *Curses! Broiled Again!: The Hottest Urban Legends Going* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1989); and *The Baby Train and Other Lusty Urban Legends* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1993).

16. Gillian Bennett and Paul Smith, *Contemporary Legend: A Folklore Bibliography* (New York: Garland, 1993).