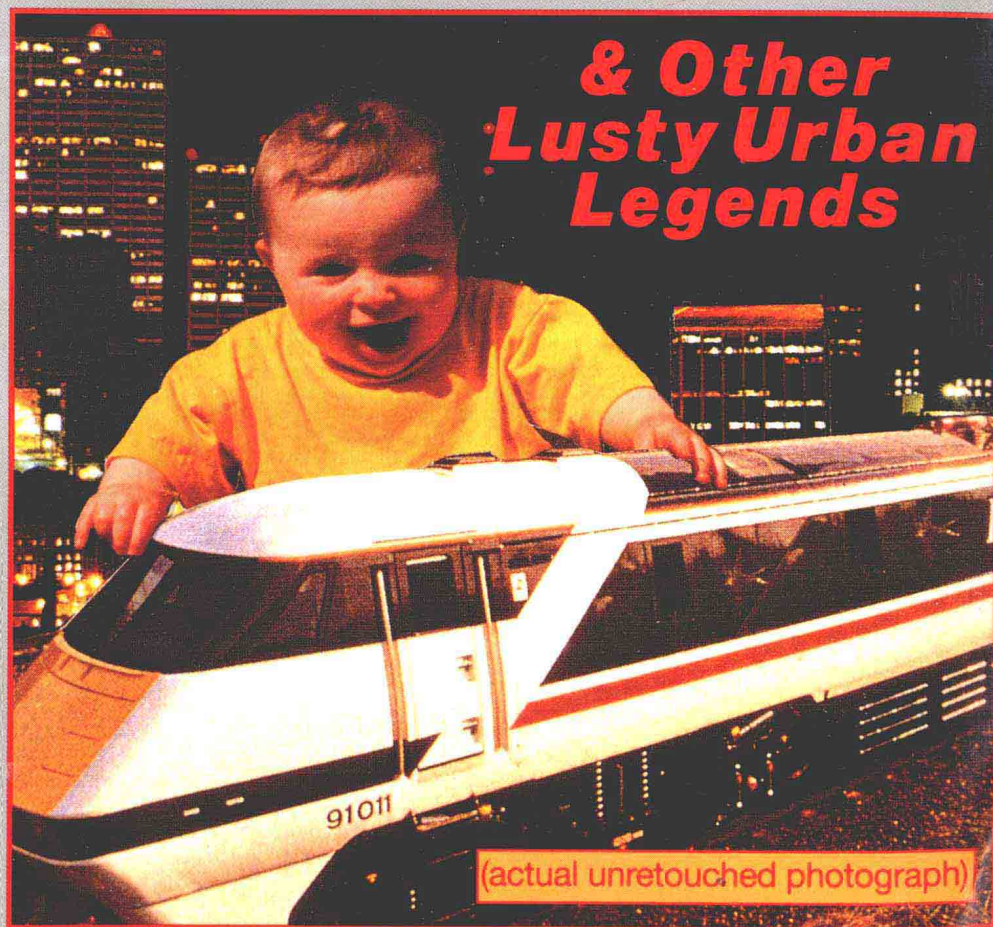


***THE* BABY TRAIN**

**& Other
Lusty Urban
Legends**



(actual unretouched photograph)

JAN HAROLD BRUNVAND

Author of *The Vanishing Hitchhiker*

The Baby Train

Other books by Jan Harold Brunvand

CURSES! BROILED AGAIN!

THE MEXICAN PET

THE CHOKING DOBERMAN

THE VANISHING HITCHHIKER

THE STUDY OF AMERICAN FOLKLORE

READINGS IN AMERICAN FOLKLORE

1by Train

And Other Lusty Urban Legends

JAN HAROLD BRUNVAND
UNIVERSITY OF UTAH

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There's a story that Reagan loves to tell about a black welfare woman in Chicago who lives lavishly and supposedly collects something like a hundred and three welfare checks under different names. Now this anecdote has been checked by a number of different people, including Joe Califano, who has written to the president on three different occasions to tell him that the story is mythical and that this woman doesn't exist. The president knows the anecdote isn't true, but he continues to use it.

There are a hundred urban legends just like it, such as the one about the fat lady getting out of a taxi and buying liquor with her food stamps.

—from Man of the House: The Life and Political Memoirs of Speaker Tip O'Neill. With William Novak. (New York: Random House, 1987), 347–48.

CONTENTS

PREFACE: SOME CAN TELL 'EM, SOME CAN'T 11

1. Sex and Scandal Legends 33

“The Baby Train” 33

“Superhero Hijinks” 38

“The Hairdresser’s Error” 44

“The Butcher’s Prank” 47

“The Bad Bachelorette” 50

Photo Faux Pas and the Infamous Toothbrush Story 53

“The Shocking Videotape” 61

2. Horrors 65

“Flights of Fancy” 65

“Mothers’ Double Talk” and Other Domestic
Tragedies 68

Three Sticky Situations 72

“The Accidental Cannibals” 75

“The Exploding Bra” 80

Exploding Airplanes 83

“The Failed Suicide” 86

“Psychic Videotapes” 88

“No News but Bad News”	92
The Jersey Devil	95
Mothman—Big Bird or Big Fantasy?	98
“Honey the Clown”	101
The Well to Hell	105
Drug Horror Stories	109
3. Crime and Punishment	113
Foiled Again! Lessons from Folklore	113
Annual Campus Crime-Rumor Scares	116
Crime Victims Speak, and Folklorists Listen	120
City Life	125
From the Annals of Modern Crime	128
“The Body in the Bed”	131
“The Slasher under the Car”	134
“The Colander Copier Caper”	139
Crime and the Quake	146
“The Kidney Heist”	149
4. On-the-Job Legends	155
Career Decisions	155
“The Bedbug Letter”	158
Roughneck Fishermen Throw ’em Back	163
“The Wife on the Flight”	166
Mistaken Identities	169
“The Technology Contest”	174
“Give Me a High Three”	178
A Dirt-Cheap Way of Selling Real Estate	181
Tales from the Greenroom	185
The Modern Tax Rumor	188
Log-on Lingo and Other Net Takes	191
5. Fun and Games	195
“Built in a Day”	195
Tour Guide Stories	199

Golf Stories	203
These Creative Tales Age Well	207
Biker Legends	210
Generation Gap Lore Moves with the Times	217
Messin' with Jazz	220

6. Foreign Relations 223

Culture Clash Legends	223
Refugees Adapt to Life Hmong Strangers	226
British Travel Troubles	229
Good on You, Australians	231
Tall Tales from the Low Countries	237
Finnish Urban Legends	240
My Man in Silesia	242
Hold That Taiga Tale	245
The Latest Legends from Italy	247
Urban Legends in Japan	250

7. Animal Legends 253

Sad Animal Tales, and Why There Are No Cats in Solvay, New York	253
Why Your Pet Hates the Vet	259
"Stupid Pet Rescues"	262
Motown Panthers (and Others) Are Hard to Trail	267
"The Hunter's Nightmare"	270
"The Flying Cow"	273
"The Missionaries and the Cat"	276
"The Spider in the Cactus"	278
"The Snake in the Greens" and other Weird Green Things	288

8. Academic Legends 293

Back to School Legends	293
"The Obligatory Wait"	296

Sinking Libraries	299
Switched Campus Buildings	302
“The Dormitory Surprise”	305
“The Gay Roommate”	308
“The Daughter’s Letter from College”	312
Lending a Hand at Med School	315
Lessons in Compassion	318
Dissertation Blues	322
 A TYPE-INDEX OF URBAN LEGENDS	 325
INDEX	349

PREFACE: SOME CAN TELL 'EM, SOME CAN'T

The legend studies in this book—like those in my last one, *Curses! Broiled Again!* (1989)—were first published in my twice-weekly newspaper column “Urban Legends,” then revised and expanded, based on further research plus readers’ responses. Although folklore, by definition, requires oral tradition to survive, much of the material for my studies in recent years has come to me in the form of letters and clippings and computer bulletin-board entries that echo the word-of-mouth careers of contemporary legends. But I always keep my ears open, and not long ago I had an experience that is unique in my three decades as a folklorist: I witnessed the genesis of a legend firsthand.

The scene was Texas, where I had traveled to attend a scholarly meeting about contemporary legends. Half a dozen of us folklorists were seated around a table at a Chinese restaurant, discussing what to order. We were wavering between two family-style alternatives, which would allow us to sample several dishes.

The attentive Chinese waitress was taking drink orders. Since we were all from different parts of the country, she was having a little difficulty understanding our various regional dialects.

The waitress had just gotten the first four orders down and was waiting for the man on my right to choose when he stated his opinion on the food order. He said, "Let's go back to plan one."

I echoed that, saying "OK, plan one," and then we turned our attention back to ordering our drinks, but the waitress had already left.

A few minutes later she returned with a tray of six drinks: an iced tea, a Coke, two cocktails—and two glasses of plum wine. Plum wine? Who ordered that? The waitress smiled and insisted that we had, and so the two of us without drinks accepted the wine, shrugged, and raised our glasses in a toast.

In time one of the other folklorists figured it out: "Plan one" had sounded like "plum wine" to the waitress.

Since we were all folklorists, we appreciated this apt illustration of how a misunderstood word or phrase may lead to changes in traditional texts.

Later in the evening I heard the first variation of the story. But the teller, a member of our dinner party, messed it up by saying "Plan A," which destroyed the punchline. Some can tell 'em, some can't.

The storyteller's mistake got a big laugh, though, when he had to back up and correct himself, and by the next morning people at the meeting were telling the *new* story about how the guy had garbled the telling of his story about the Chinese waitress. Pretty soon just the phrases "Plan one" or "Plan A" were enough to bring a chuckle, often followed by other anecdotes we knew about misunderstood words leading to comical results.

It started to sound like a set of Chinese boxes at that point, and I won't be surprised if at some subsequent meeting a folklorist gives a paper analyzing this whole thing.

A similar dining-out story—also set in an ethnic restaurant and turning on a misunderstanding of food-related terms—was told to me by a colleague. This man had heard it from his mother who said it had actually happened. But like most urban legends it seemed too good to be true.

My friend's mother had heard about two Texans visiting New York City. Every morning for a week they went into one of the famous delicatessens on Sixth Avenue, wearing cowboy boots and ten-gallon hats, and ordered lox and bagels.

At the end of the week, the owner came over to their table and said that he'd noticed them eating lox and bagels every morning. He said he was happy they were eating at his place, but did they like lox and bagels all that much?

"Sure, we like 'em a lot," one of the Texans answered. "But can you tell us, which is the lox and which is the bagels?"

Reminds me of the time when my daughter held up a cookie she was eating and asked, "Daddy, which is the fig and which is the newton?"

Consider, for a moment, how legends evolve—or, in some cases, *devolve*.

Sometimes we folklorists talk about stories as if they're alive. We say an urban legend like "The Vanishing Hitchhiker" was born in a particular era, spread, changed, and eventually may die out. I find myself speaking of "The Choking Doberman" as "having a life of its own," or of "The Killer in the Backseat" having "mutated to fit a new environment."

I remembered this when I read biologist Richard Dawkins' book about evolution, *The Selfish Gene* (Oxford University Press, 1976). Dawkins alluded to folklore-style changes in explaining how species evolve.

In his view, errors in "copying" are inevitable, and texts always devolve—that is, get worse as they change—while species sometimes evolve (that is, successfully adapt). But I doubt the first axiom, since some urban legends get better and some get worse as they're told. It depends upon the skill of the storyteller.

Dawkins reminds us that "all scribes, however careful, are bound to make a few errors, and some are not above a little willful 'improvement.' " Storytellers, like scribes, also commit human errors when repeating oral tales, and sometimes they

too attempt to improve upon what they originally heard. At times, I would insist, they succeed.

For instance, I'd argue that "The Hook" has usually gotten better, not worse, as it has been repeated again and again. "The Hook" is a story—related originally in my first book, *The Vanishing Hitchhiker*—about two kids parked on Lover's Lane with the radio on. Hearing an announcement that a killer with an artificial hand is on the loose, the girl suggests that they leave. The boy pulls out and drives her home. When he walks around the car to open her door, he finds a bloody hook attached to the door handle.

Over the years, tellers drop details that don't fit the plot—say the exact make and model of the car. Or they adapt the legend to fit local conditions, thus making it a bit more plausible. The result may be the tightest, scariest, most compelling and believable version of "The Hook" to come down Lover's Lane since the legend was first told some thirty years ago.

Of course urban legends may also devolve when poor storytellers confuse the plot, pump the story up with extraneous details, mangle the punch line, or give away the ending by saying something like "Let me tell you the one about the hook found dangling on the door handle of the car. . . ." There's no point in telling the story after that! This kind of opening *deserves* to die out.

For example, a reader wrote me about a news item that, he said, "sounds like the old 'Rat in the Hairdo' legend." He was confusing "The Kentucky-Fried Rat" and "The Mouse in the Coke" with "The Spider in the Hairdo"—three quite different legends all dealing with contamination.

Needless to say, I don't expect to encounter any further versions of "The Rat in the Hairdo."

This kind of development was illustrated recently in an experience of my colleague Karen Lawrence. Dr. Lawrence had been named a Guggenheim Fellow and was planning to conduct a study of the ways that travel literature presents female protagonists. An article about her research project in our stu-

dent newspaper quoted Lawrence as saying that “the female traveler carries different cultural fright from that of her male counterpart.” I felt sure she had said “cultural *freight*” to the reporter. When I asked Karen about this, she explained, “Well, actually, I said ‘cultural baggage.’” From “baggage” to “freight” to “fright”—that’s devolution, for sure, and it happens all the time in urban legends.

For a final example, take the old story about the black man on the elevator who is mistaken for a mugger but turns out to be Reggie Jackson. The man says “Sit!” to his dog, but other passengers on the elevator think he’s commanding them, so they sit on the floor.

Later, some people said it was *Jesse* Jackson or even *Michael* Jackson on the elevator, an obvious confusion of first names. Soon other storytellers were inserting different black personalities’ names into the story, including Eddie Murphy and Lionel Richie, reflecting these entertainers’ growing popularity.

Eventually I heard a highly deviant version of “The Elevator Incident” that named Lionel Hampton, the octogenarian jazzman, hardly likely to seem a threat to anyone! I noted that in most versions of the legend featuring less menacing-looking celebrities, to make better sense of the story, the men are said to be accompanied by burly bodyguards.

All we need now is for someone to mix things up further in this legend and tell the elevator story about someone named “Lionel Jackson.” Don’t expect that version to survive.

In September 1989 I spent two weeks on the road publicizing my most recent book, *Curses! Broiled Again!* The first leg of the trip took me from New York City to the Rocky Mountains and proved once again that urban legends are popular from the metropolis to the boondocks.

Early Monday morning in the Big Apple someone told a story about some tourists who were visiting South Street Seaport. It seems they picked up a cute little stray doggie and adopted it. It was only later that they learned from a veterinarian that their new pet wasn’t a Chihuahua after all. It was a

wharf rat. "Here we go again!" I thought. That story is a variation of the legend after which I titled my third book, *The Mexican Pet*.

On Tuesday, taking call-ins on Leonard Lopate's "New York and Company" radio program on WNYC I heard two more local legends. One caller told about a big Bar Mitzvah party during which Cherries Jubilee was served. There were so many guests, he said, that the mass of flaming desserts set off the sprinkler system.

Another caller described a Chinese woman who was carrying a live chicken in her shopping bag when she boarded a city bus. Realizing that the fowl was annoying fellow passengers, the woman calmly reached over and strangled the offensive bird.

After New York, it was on to Minneapolis. On Wednesday morning a caller to the "Boone and Erickson Show" on WCCO talked about two bachelor farmers who had kept the frozen body of their grandfather in their barn during a long and bitterly cold Minnesota winter. The caller said that the bachelors had placed the corpse in a sitting position with its arms outstretched and thumbs sticking up so they could hang their feed sack there until spring when it was warm enough for a funeral. Boone (or was it Erickson?) chuckled at how easily I fell for that tall tale.

Next, in Chicago, I appeared on the program "One Flight Up," on WBEZ.*

One Chicagoan called with a variation of the "Spider in the Hairdo" legend. She said that a woman wanting nice even dreadlocks had been told to put honey on her hair and twist the strands tightly before going to sleep. The next morning her head was infested with cockroaches.

Next stop, Denver. A man called Mike Rosen's KOA talk show to describe a highly successful Chinese restaurant in New

*The station is a legend itself. The show's name refers to the fact that the building elevators only reach the thirty-ninth floor, so visitors must walk the last steep flight up to the fortieth where the station is perched.