

*The  
Mexican  
Pet*

*More "New" Urban Legends  
and Some Old Favorites*

JAN HAROLD BRUNVAND

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藏书章

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PENGUIN BOOKS



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## PREFACE

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# When Will It All End?

Brunvand, a professor of English and folklore at the University of Utah, seems to have stumbled onto a cottage industry.

—Peter Gorner in *The Chicago Tribune*  
21 June 1984

How right he was! First I wrote ♣ *The Vanishing Hitchhiker*, \* about the scant three dozen or so classic urban legends that had been identified by earlier folklore scholars. Then came a sequel, ♣ *The Choking Doberman*, † with several dozen “new” urban legends, many of them sent to me by my faithful readers; this time, I thought, I had really done the definitive job on these true-sounding but utterly false stories that pass from person to person even in this modern day. But I was wrong again, as readers, students, friends, and acquaintances were quick to inform me. More stories arrived, and the result is this latest collection of about fifty even newer “new” urban leg-

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\*New York: W. W. Norton, 1981, hereinafter referred to with the symbol ♣.

†New York: W. W. Norton, 1984, hereinafter referred to with the symbol ♣.

ends, along with some new versions of old favorites. I'm beginning to wonder when it will all end.

But why *should* it end? Folklore—the “oral tradition”—never stands still for stuffing and mounting by the experts. No sooner do we folklorists track down, record, and publish a story, a song, or a saying than it pops up again in a different disguise. Repetition and variation in some traditional group and style are the very features that define folklore, and this folk process of oral transmission and transformation defies the march of progress. In fact, folk tradition even hitchhikes along with technological advances, so we can hear urban legends now on radio and television, see them dramatized in films, read them in newspapers, and transmit them to others via the mail, computer, or telephone. What the first stage of my cottage industry largely consists of is merely reading my mail, following the media, and keeping my ears open for the latest “true” stories that are going around in several different versions.

People are always telling, writing, and phoning me these rumors and stories—wonderfully bizarre, usually funny, sometimes horrible, often weird, but always plausible. As soon as I open a letter that begins something like “I just read your book and I wonder if *this* one might be an urban legend . . .,” I know that I'm probably about to read another likely candidate for my folkloristic research. As soon as someone starts telling me something like “I don't know if this is *true*, but . . .,” I've come to expect yet another piece of data—i.e. a “new” urban legend. I must admit that, in one form or another, I've heard most of them before, but that's an occupational hazard for folklorists.

“Folklore”—the material—is what goes around and around and around by word of mouth, ever recognizable but ever changing too. “Folklore”—the study—is what I and my fellow researchers in this field do with it: collect

the variations, organize them, and most of all try to explain the forms this material takes and the needs it seems to fill.

This book places *texts* rather than analyses of recent urban rumors and legends in the foreground. All of these texts are "new"; that is, they are either currently circulating versions of beliefs and stories discussed in *The Vanishing Hitchhiker* and *The Choking Doberman*, or they are recent items not mentioned in my earlier books. In actuality, of course, most of the stories are "old"; that is, they represent variations on previous themes. I have added comments and notes to each text explaining this sort of thing, and the reader wanting to learn more about urban legend studies should consult my first two volumes. There, too, you will find many other familiar urban legends that I couldn't squeeze into this collection, such as ♣ "The Hook," ♣ "The Runaway Grandmother," ♣ "Alligators in the Sewers," and ♣ "The Cement-Filled Car" in *The Vanishing Hitchhiker*; and ♣ "The Elephant That Sat on a VW," ♣ "The Procter & Gamble Trademark," ♣ "The Stuck Couple," and ♣ "Superglue Revenge" in *The Choking Doberman*. The little symbols, remember, always remind you in which earlier book the stories that are presented here were discussed.

Many texts in this book, unlike in my previous two, are quoted from news media and other sources in "popular" culture rather than purely "folk" circulation. I have come to appreciate much more since I began studying urban legends how central the print and broadcast media have become in the dissemination of traditional stories. Along with the claim that these odd things supposedly happened to the proverbial friend of a friend (the foaf), the other common validating formula used when they are told is, "I think this was in the paper . . . or on the news." And since most urban legends are at least *plausible*, if a bit unlikely, most people tend to believe them at



Credit: Alan Dumas and Peter Hoey

first—at least they believe *some* of the stories *some* of the time.

These stories (despite the subtitle of my first book) are not necessarily just *American* folklore. I evidently misled some readers with the line “American Urban Legends and Their Meanings.” What I meant was that most of my examples were drawn from sources in the United States and analyzed in terms of modern American culture. But the urban legend *as a genre* is not an exclusive American phenomenon. Take ♣ “The Death Car,” for instance, which has been a favorite in the United States for at least thirty years. People tell it something like this:

*There's this beautiful classic Corvette [Porsche, Thunderbird, Buick etc.] that a dealer out in \_\_\_\_\_ has been trying to get rid of for months, and he's only charging \$200 [\$50, \$100, \$500, etc.] for it! The*

*catch is that someone died in that car, or committed suicide or something, way out in the desert [woods, boondocks, inside his garage, etc.]: The body wasn't discovered for about a month, and the smell of death is so strong in that car that no one can stand to drive it. The stench not only permeated the upholstery but even soaked into the fiber glass body of the Corvette. So everyone that tries to drive the car brings it right back to the dealer and demands a refund. Wow, just think, a Corvette for \$200! I heard this from a guy at work who knows someone who has a friend who thought he could either fumigate it or get used to the smell, but finally he had to take it back just like everyone else.*

A writer for the *London Times* (27 July 1982) reading about that one in my first book suggested that the "gorily odoriferous history" of the car tainted with the smell of leath "reveals a knot of American obsessions—hygiene, money, death and automobiles." He was right about the latent themes in the story, I think, but definitely wrong about the Americanness of it, since the legend is widely told in several countries with appropriate variations in the price and model of the car and the circumstances of the death.

Another recent favorite "American" urban legend is a variation on the "Hilarious Accidents" theme that centers on an exploding toilet. A typical version goes like this:

*There was a guy I heard about that had to be in the hospital for something. [Often it is to recover from an earlier hilarious accident.] And while he was in there his wife decided to paint the bathroom. Well, when she finished painting, she cleaned the brushes and dumped the paint thinner in the toilet; but before she could flush it down, her husband arrived home from*

*the hospital. The first thing he happened to want to do was to use the bathroom, so he sat down on the toilet; and he had a cigarette in his hand, so he just dropped it into the toilet at the same time. He blew himself right off the pot! So the paramedics came—or maybe it was the ambulance guys that had just brought him home—and they had to load him on the stretcher face down. Then one of the ambulance guys asked him what in the world had happened, and when he told them, they started to laugh so hard that one of them let go of the corner of the stretcher, and he fell off and broke his leg.*

A legend like this makes it obvious why some journalists refer to such stories as “Mack Sennetts,” in reference to the old Keystone cops movies with their slapstick scenes.\* Another journalistic term for urban legends is “Red Wagon Stories,” a possible reference to the red rolling ticket office in oldtime carnivals and circuses and signifying (perhaps) ballyhoo and blarney.† In Holland, incidentally, urban legends are known as *Broodje Aap*, or “Monkey Sandwiches,” with reference to the story that certain sausages are made of monkey meat.‡

International though urban legends—by any name—may be, many people still seem to regard them as peculiar to the United States. To another English journalist (*Daily Telegraph*, 17 February 1983), for example, stories

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\*Columnist Al Allen of *The Sacramento Bee* used this term in his very first “On the Light Side” column in April 1970, writing about urban legends.

†Columnist Ray Orrock of *The Livermore, California, Tri-Valley Herald* brought this term to my attention but lacked for an explanation. I’ve also heard of a journalist calling such stories “dead catters,” probably with reference to “The Dead Cat in the Package.”

‡See Ethel Portnoy’s book of that title, which is subtitled “De folklore van de post-industriële samenleving” (Amsterdam: Uitgeverij De Harmonie, 1978).

like "The Death Car" or "The Exploding Toilet" merely prove how low-brow we Americans are:

*Americans are notoriously concerned more with verisimilitude than with truth. They are gossip-mongers, collectors of scandal, thrivers on rumour, and manifest a childlike belief in any story, no matter how incredible or outrageous, so long as there are enough "facts" inserted to give it credence.*

*. . . Americans are simply displaying a normal, unhealthy, interest in scandalous and embarrassing situations. . . . [These stories] are a sad comment on Americans' naivety and lack of self-confidence.*

The fact is that many urban legends that we tell and believe so gullibly here in the Colonies have their counterparts, or even their prototypes, in Europe. The British Isles are a hotbed of such stories that are purveyed not only in oral tradition but regularly also by a daily press always searching for fresh scandal and gags with which to regale their eager readers. I found a lovely version of "The Choking Doberman" right on the front page of the stately London *Times*; and here, just for the record, is an exploding toilet variant as told to me by an Englishman:

*This bloke was having a crap in the local bog\* and the toilet exploded underneath him. You see, the attendant had just cleaned the toilet with bleach or something, and this feller crapping caused a chemical reaction. The attendant came to the rescue, but he couldn't get into the cubicle because the door was locked, so he had to call for the fire brigade and the*

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\*Lower-class British slang for privy or toilet, the term "bog" appears in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century English sources as "bog-house" or "bog-shop." The allusion is evidently to the soft, dirty, "boggy" nature of an outhouse, though here the reference is to a water closet in a public restroom.



*ambulance. And when the ambulance men came they had to put this feller face down on the stretcher because his bum was too sore, and they couldn't cover it with a blanket for the same reason, and the ambulance men couldn't stop laughing, and he fell off the stretcher twice.*

In case you're wondering, so far as I can tell, that story was a rural gag told about outhouses before it began to circulate as an urban legend and got adapted to American suburban bathrooms and English public "bogs." The punchline of the hoary jest, spoken by the farmer who was blown out of the privy, was this: "It must have been something I et!" With that minimal scholarly note, let us get on to some more of the stories themselves.