Afterword

The succession of popular themes in American urban legends serves as a rough index of people's concerns and fantasies as they have changed through time. Probably even "The Vanishing Hitchhiker"—superb ghost story that it is—would not have enjoyed its continued appeal if the vehicle had not been changed from the horses and buggies found in nineteenth-century prototypes of this legend to the modern automobile. Our great esteem for cars and their relatively high cost have also contributed to the popularity of "The Death Car." The separate idea of marital infidelity (another sure winner) enters such later car-legends as "The Philanderer's Porsche" and "The Solid Cement Cadillac." But even more significant than the automobile's mere presence, since at least the 1950s we find references in urban legends to the social effects of living in a youth-oriented, mobile, car-loving society. This is clearly shown in such folk narratives as "The Hook," "The Boyfriend's Death," and "The Killer in the Backseat," all of which incorporate the young-driver, the defenseless-female, and the fearsome-stranger themes so typical of the accident reports and crime stories regularly encountered in the media.

Our data are incomplete in many respects, but if a pre-
Afterword

liminary history of American urban legends is sketched out we
would have to say that from the turn of the century to World
War II only the death/ghost/car stories really seemed to
thrive. A few other legends that emerged full-blown and vig-
orous later were just beginning to appear then; these include
“The Dead Cat in the Package” (1906?), “The Nude Surprise
Party” (1927), and “Alligators in the Sewers” (1935) and “The
Runaway Grandmother” (late 1930s). Following the war, we
find that both “The Death Car” and “The Dead Cat in the
Package” had reached Europe, while “The Runaway Grand-
mother” was firmly established in American tradition, evidently
from a European wartime source. Popular teenage stories like
“The Spider in the Hairdo” and “The Hook” appeared by the
mid-1950s, as did the more sedate and domestically-appealing
“Red Velvet Cake” story. Recreational vehicles entered legends
at about the same period, and some inner-city legends began
to migrate, as families were then doing, to the suburbs with
their commuters and shopping malls.

All of the earlier urban legends continued to circulate
through the 1960s along with further new variations on horror
plots (“The Boyfriend’s Death,” “The Killer in the Backseat,”
etc.), and at the end of the decade there was a proliferation
of imported “Snakes in Blankets” and of marijuana growing
along with the alligators thrown in the sewers of New York
City and occasionally elsewhere. Early in the 1970s the
decades-old motif of foreign meat in food suddenly blossomed
in “The Kentucky Fried Rat” story along with the
European counterpart (“Rat Bone in the Chicken Salad,” etc.);
the cement-filled car had found its way to Europe as well,
although in a variant form. The latest technical gadgets and
cultural trends—such as to microwave cooking and disco danc-
ing—are reflected in current urban legends, but at the same
time traditional ghostly vehicles (now airliners) and ghostly
hitchhikers (now Jesus or one of His followers) keep appear-
ing. If there is a lesson in all of this, it may be that whatever

is new and puzzling or scary, but which eventually becomes
familiar, may turn up in modern folklore.

In a general way our urban legends often depict a clash be-
tween modern conditions and some aspect of a traditional life-
style. For example, keeping a pet is something of an anachro-
nism in urban housing with working family-members, and the
dead pet from an apartment poses an especially uncomfortable
problem of disposal. Similarly, an aged grandmother may be
regarded as a nuisance by Americans nowadays, especially (in
the nightmarish legend) when she dies on a vacation trip
abroad. Since we believe we should not have to deal directly
with such things as death any more (and actually we seldom
do), the folk stories adopt the culturally acceptable solution
to such problems in the arrival of a helpful anonymous
stranger, whether shoplifter, thief, or mortician. (Remember
that in some earlier versions of “The Vanishing Hitchhiker,”
taking a corpse into the car was an acceptable motif to story-
tellers; but now the first response to the body is to get it out
on the roof, and then to get rid of it for good as soon as
possible.)

Children, once mostly reared by their parents, are now
often left in the care of strangers; thereby they may be en-
derangered, legends assert, along with the baby-sitters them-
selves. Microwave ovens and mind-expanding drugs may come
together to produce tragic results; better, perhaps, say the
urban legends, if we had stuck with conventional ovens and
old-fashioned stimuliants. (It is conveniently forgotten that
tipsy baby-sitters also crammed babies into gas or electric ovens
in the older folklore.) In our new, mobile lifestyle (bound to
change as energy costs continue to rise) even someone trying
to feel at-home-on-the-road in his own camper or trailer is
clearly in the wrong element, and so he must suffer a naked
warning shock before he gets safely home and into his clothes
again. Hairsprays, airliners, Cokes, and Big Macs are fraught
with gruesome dangers—spiders, ghosts, rodents, and worms,
Afterword

respectively. The shopping-center discount stores, those most characteristic modern marketing centers, continue to retain vestiges of the lack of quality control and standardization typical of earlier American commerce, except that now the flawed products are imported from backward countries.

The distrust of foreigners runs deep in other aspects of modern folklore (such as ethnic slurs and dialect jokes), but urban legends emphasize instead the shortcomings of some of our own institutions, such as large hotels, manufacturers, food processors, department stores, and fast-food restaurants. These are held up to scrutiny and criticism in the legends, and they are found wanting. When the consumer finally manages to win a case against the company lawyers, he or she is alleged to have gained large monetary judgments; but the dollar figures are always much greater in folklore than in real life, just as the car bargains are mostly legendary rather than objectively provable.

For all the threats and injuries coming from outside sources in the urban legends, many of the crises they deal with are simply the result of normal human misjudgment and poor luck. Time and again the meanings of stories are clear: “He should have known better,” “She got what she deserved,” etc. The girlfriend, baby-sitter, or roommate, for example, should not have been left alone, and even when she was she might have asserted herself and have given some life-saving help. The boss ought never to have assumed that everyone in his family forgot his birthday and that his beautiful secretary really was ready to jump into bed with him. The cement truck driver should have stayed on the job and trusted his wife. The nude rider in the trailer should not have been there like that in the first place, or at least he should have stayed there. The middle-aged female shoplifter and the foreign car-thieves merely get to keep what they unluckily stole—a dead cat and a dead body. Just about the only innocent victims we find in these stories seem to be the baby in the oven (although at least one of them is put there because he cries too much) and the snake-bitten woman shopper (although maybe she should have had the sense to shop elsewhere).

It is tempting to take one or two of the most typical recent American urban legends as inclusive symbols of distinctive aspects of our recent history. “The Snake in the Blanket” some have suggested, reflects our guilt stemming from the war in Vietnam, and implies that the venomous intentions we fear that some Asian peoples may feel toward us in the postwar period are manifesting themselves in revenge via imported goods. If we follow this line of interpretation, we might say that “The Baby in the Oven” develops from suppressed desires to commit infanticide, represents mixed love and hate for our children, guilt for sometimes leaving them with strangers, dread of extermination by modern technology, and deep-seated distrust of outsiders coming into our homes.

Without denying that such themes are implied in these tales, or that legends are generally appealing at more than one level, I believe that a great deal of their continuing popularity can be explained more simply in terms of an artistic exploration in oral tradition of the possibilities of things. Goods are imported in quantity from some countries with tropical climates: what if a snake or snake eggs got into them (as insects sometimes stow away in fruit shipments)? Microwave ovens are becoming more common in homes all the time: what if a living creature got into one (as a cat sometimes climbs into a warm clothes-drier left open)? As in any age or with any subject—when a skilled storyteller begins to play with such ideas, and when members of his audience respond, repeat the stories, and begin to add their own flourishes, then legends begin to form and to circulate. Probably by the time this is being read new examples of false-true tales will already be going around, and these urban legends too will contain symbols of our culture and reflections of our lives.

190

191