

Intro to Folk Studies

"The Sleeping Roommate"

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One of the most interesting aspects of folk studies I have encountered is the urban belief tale, an example of which is the subject of this paper. An urban belief tale is a story which is told as an actual occurrence and is widely repeated and believed. What follows is my recollection of how a particular urban belief tale was told to me:

The Sleeping Roommate

A friend of mine knows this girl who goes to school at Eastern Kentucky University, who almost got killed. This is how it happened: she went to a party one night and stayed out real late. She didn't come back to the dorm until about three or four in the morning. Her dorm is right on the edge of campus...anyway when she got home she didn't see any light coming from under the door, so she assumed that her roommate had already gone to bed and was asleep.

She opened the door as quietly as she could (she had had quite a bit to drink so it probably wasn't real quiet) and tiptoed into the room. The room was totally dark and she couldn't see a thing. She whispered her roommate's name and got no response, so she assumed she was asleep. Out of consideration for her roommate she decided not to turn on the light and risk waking her.

She took off her clothes and pulled on a T-shirt in the dark, and climbed into her bed. Like I said, she had quite a bit to drink at the party she had been to, so she fell right to sleep.

Anyway the next morning came and the sun was shining in the window and this girl woke up. When she turned over to see if her roommate was up, all she saw was blood everywhere! Her roommate lay there covered in blood with a big butcher knife sticking out of her. She started to scream and noticed something on the mirror. She looked, and written in her roommate's blood on the mirror was this message: "Aren't you glad that you didn't turn on the light?"

A variation of this particular tale was first relayed to me three years ago during my freshman year at the University of Louisville. Although the first version I heard differed in many details from the one above, which I heard about three months ago here at Western, I immediately recognized them as being the same story. In the first version I heard, the setting was Western Kentucky University and the girls shared a house instead of a dormitory room, but details like these are variables which easily change to lend credibility to the tales. The fact that both stories were so similar and yet heard three years apart attests to the fact that they were probably not true.

Along with this tale there are many others that are as common. Most of these stories tend to the bizarre, supernatural

and unnatural. These stories rely mainly upon word of mouth for perpetuation, but they are reported as truth quite frequently in newspapers, magazines and the electronic media.

The reasons for the spread of such stories may be as broad and varied as the tales are themselves. The people that repeat these stories don't realize that the stories may appeal to their subconscious fears or desires.

The sleeping roommate story, and many others, to the best of my knowledge are told only with young girls as the subjects. This may reveal feelings of insecurity and fear among women. Both the times I heard the sleeping roommate story, it was told by a young woman. This could be an indication that stories of this nature are more widely believed by young women because of their own feelings of insecurity and fear.

These stories may also reflect a feeling in our society that women should not be out on their own. Women have long been viewed as not being able to care for themselves and these stories could be subconscious reinforcement of these very ideas. Of course, when someone tells this story they don't say "Ha, Ha, I knew a woman couldn't take care of herself", but the implication is there just the same.

In addition to these reasons, people love to be scared. Something within us loves the excitement of a scary story and this could proliferate these types of urban belief tales. As long as it happened to an acquaintance of an acquaintance we can believe it and be frightened by it.

Urban belief tales about prepared and prepackaged foods are as prevalent as those of the sleeping roommate vein. The widespread belief of the mouse in a coke bottle type of story is a commentary about our uneasiness concerning foods which we don't prepare ourselves. The fact that these types of stories are so widespread and easily believed can be attributed to many reasons. Of all the products produced today, occasional breeches in quality control are inevitable. When actual cases of this sort do occur, they are likely to get media attention. So when stories that aren't true surface, they seem more credible because of the media exposure of actual cases.

Another explanation for the widespread belief of the mouse in the coke bottle type of story is the fact that many of these stories are accompanied with tales of huge sums of money paid to the victimized consumer by the manufacturer of the contaminated products. This kind of "strike it rich" sidelight appeals to everyone. People enjoy hearing that an average person has brought a giant corporation like Coca-Cola to its knees. The story of an underdog who comes out on top has always been popular.

I feel that another reason people believe these stories so readily is that to some degree, we all have an inborn paranoia, a natural fear of things which we don't know about. Upon hearing contaminated food stories, we immediately imagine the unsanitary conditions of the bottling plant, fried chicken restaurant, or soup cannery, even though most of us have never seen the inside of such places.

Another type of popular urban belief tale are those that involve the supernatural. Stories that involve haunted houses, hitchhiking ghosts, and other supernatural phenomena are as widely told as other urban belief tales. These types of stories are also passed on as having actually happened. These tales are widespread and they recur at various times.

I believe people are willing to believe this type of tale for several reasons. The popularity of the theme in modern culture can't be ignored. Movies, television shows and songs have been produced, using these urban belief tales as inspiration. Although people may not believe Halloween, just seeing the movie may make people more receptive to stories of the supernatural.

A second reason may be because of peoples' religious beliefs. Many "miracles" and religious stories can be considered supernatural, and they are widely believed.

The need for escapism could be another reason for belief in these tales. People want to believe in something other than their everyday existence and common occurrences. Spooky stories of ghosts and haunted houses told as the truth provide this escapist diversion.

Although reasons for the spread of urban belief tales may never be pinpointed, analysis of the tale and circumstances under which it is told can shed light on possible answers. People need to rally to a cause, they need to forget their own problems, and they need to be encouraged. As long as people have

these needs they will believe tales that meet them.