

ETCETERA

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URBAN MYTHS

of the Internet

A friend stopped at a pay-at-the-pump gas station to get gas. After paying at the pump she started to leave but the attendant inside came over the speaker and told her that something happened with her card and she needed to come inside to pay. She was confused because the transaction showed complete, but the attendant insisted she come inside. Once inside, he told her that while she was pumping gas, a man slipped into the back seat of her car. Scared, she looked outside in time to see her car door open and the man slip out. The report is that a new gang initiation is to bring back a woman's body part and a way they are doing this is by crawling into a vehicle or underneath a car, cutting the lady's ankles to disable them in order to kidnap them, kill and dismember them. Please pass this on to other women and be extra careful. This is real and it really happened in Hamilton.

BY PATRICK CASEY
Staff Writer

You've just been subjected to an urban myth.

Although the story, or a form of it, may have happened somewhere in the world, there is absolutely no evidence to suggest gangs are causing an epidemic of murders and dismemberment at gas bars and shopping malls across North America.

If reality was evident in the tale, traditional media outlets would alert worried residents instead of folks reading about it through their office e-mail loop.

Often based on a true story, an urban myth or legend details a series of incredible events that took place somewhere to someone.

According to the Urban Legends Research Centre, an Australian-based web site created by Redman Lucas Wells, people often confuse myths with urban beliefs.

"If someone told you that you stood a chance of having your kidney removed by a body organ crime syndicate when visiting Las Vegas, you have probably encountered an urban belief," Wells explained in a e-mail response earlier this week.

If, on the other hand, that same person tells you a detailed story about a businessman who went to Las Vegas on a trip and woke up in a bathtub full of ice one morning with a kidney missing and a sign nearby that says "Call 911 or you'll die after meeting an attractive woman the night before and accepting an invitation to have a drink with her back in her room, then you have encountered an urban legend."

My girlfriend was approached in the parking



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lot at Square One in Mississauga to sample some perfume. She said no and kept on walking and she's glad she did. I was sent an e-mail at work about someone walking up to you in a mall or parking lot and asking you to sniff perfume they are selling at a cheap price. It isn't perfume but ether, causing you to pass out and the thieves will take your wallet and valuables. This is true. Remember to pass this on.

Many of the tales evoke fear in readers, but according to York Regional Police, the force is not inundated with frantic phone calls from residents worried about crime syndicates or gang rituals.

Const. Steve Morrell recalls the murders in Florida when out-of-state drivers were rammed off the road and killed.

The story, he said, turned into a myth about drivers flashing highbeams from behind and once the lead driver pulls over, he is robbed and killed. It then developed to involve an undercover police officer and finally a criminal who had stolen a police cruiser.

"I tried to stop a lady in King City but she refused to pull over until she drove out to Nobleton and Hwy. 27 and was in an area with people around," Morrell recalled. "She was afraid because she had heard about this story."

"It wasn't a chase but she just wouldn't stop.

"The tip-off to these stories is that it always happens to a friend of a friend. That means it never happened."

But where do urban myths come from?

Perhaps one of the earliest, most popular folklore tale pops up every Halloween when parents are concerned some freak will plant a razor blade inside an apple before handing it out at their doorstep. Verifying its reality is difficult, at best.

But urban legends have been studied as a serious form of folklore for more than 40 years. Scholars such as Jan Harold Brunvand and Gary Alan Fine have long searched for the true meaning of these myths.

Christopher Dewdney is still embarrassed about the myth that reeled him in — a 1-cent surtax for every e-mail users send.

Dewdney should know better considering he's a York University professor of cultural studies who wrote a book outlining Internet culture.

"People sit in front of their computers all day and look at e-mail or porn. And the e-mail is either junk, jokes or urban myths," he said. "E-mail just stepped up the population of these myths."

"The successful ones feed into general mass phobia but a lot of it is just entertainment. Some are dark and hostile, but it's really like getting a crank phone call."

Urban Myths: Where to find them

Top Web sites detailing urban myths and legends plus background history on how they came about.

www.urbanmyths.com

— the best and worst of urban myths.

www.4urbanlegends.com

— learn about urban legends, hoaxes, myths and folklore.

www.delta-9.com/net47/myth

— send your own stories to Net47.

www.tweak.com/firstperson/urban

— urban legends in the first-person form.

www.netsquirrel.com/combatkit

— an urban legend combat kit is a free collection of canned responses to help combat Internet myths and legends.

www.ulrc.com

— The Urban Legends Research Centre acts as a forum for a rational and entertaining examination of urban legends.

www.nardis.com/~twchan/afu

— Terry Chan's urban folklore page looks at urban myths.

www.miax1.muohio.edu/~psybersite/

cyberspace/folklore/links

— the AFU and Urban Legends Archive page is dedicated to stopping the spread of Internet hoaxes.

www.urbanmyths.com/petsmain

— an urban myths site dedicated to stories about pets.

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